Editorial: Thinking (with) the Unconscious in Media and Communication Studies: Introduction to the Special Issue - Digital Media, Psychoanalysis and the Subject

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Thinking (with) the Unconscious in Media and Communication Studies: Introduction to the Special Issue

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Abstract: *Under the title Digital Media, Psychoanalysis and the Subject, this special issue of CM: Communication and Media seeks to reassess and reinvigorate psychoanalytic thinking in media and communication studies. We undertake this reassessment with a particular focus on the question of what psychoanalytic concepts, theories as well as modes of inquiry can contribute to the study of digital media. Overlooking the field of media and communication studies, we argue that psychoanalysis offers a reservoir of conceptual and methodological tools that has not been sufficiently tapped. In particular, psychoanalytic perspectives offer a heightened concern and sensibility for the unconscious, i.e. the element in human relating and relatedness that criss-crosses and mars our best laid plans and reasonable predictions. This introduction provides an insight into psychoanalysis as a discipline, indicates the ways in which it has been adopted in media research in general and research into digital media in particular and, ultimately, points to its future potential to contribute to the field.*

Keywords: *digital media, the unconscious, psychoanalysis, subjectivity, the psycho-social*

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1. Introduction

For the past two decades, critical research into media and communication has sought ways to understand the significant shift brought about by digitalisation and the proliferation of networked online media. With this shift, questions of individuality, the single media user as an entity and her/his relations to society have taken on a renewed salience. Digital media enable individual choices with regard to how media content is selected, appropriated, (dis)engaged with and modified on an unprecedented scale. Such developments have resulted in scholarship that has explored individual agency and questions of power in relation to digital media in manifold ways, be it through simple consumption choices, online activism, fan practices or many other forms of engagement.

At the same time, the individual as such has become part of the content being produced. People find themselves instigated to express and share who they are and relate to others via multiple, networked media channels on diverse platforms that create – afford, shape and suggest – relations that indicate just how interminable the processes of subjectification and individualisation are. Within the corporate realm, these platforms are characterised by the double objective of enabling feelings of community whilst also profiting from the ensuing communication (see e.g. Burston, Dyer-Witheford & Hearn, 2010; Fisher, 2012; Fuchs, 2014; Krüger & Johanssen, 2014; Krüger, 2016). Relying on targeted data extraction as business models (Turow, 2011; Fuchs, 2014), the relations they facilitate tend towards the commodification of the individual and, intentionally or not, open up possibilities for corporate and governmental surveillance. Thus, a focus on "big data" (boyd & Crawford, 2012), the politics of algorithms (Bucher, 2012; Mager, 2012; Gillespie, 2014), media populism (Moffitt, 2016) and, recently, so-called "fake news" (Bessi & Ferrara, 2016; Giglietto et al., 2016) have complicated accounts that emphasise individual choice and agency by pointing out how these individual choices become aggregated into the behaviours of "new masses" (Baxmann et al., 2014).

The notions and concepts with which researchers have sought to emphasise and highlight relevant aspects of this shifting situation, such as "convergence" (Jenkins, 2006), "connectivity" (van Dijck, 2013), "participation" (Jenkins, 2006; Carpentier, 2011), "produsage" (Bruns, 2008), "interactivity" (Lister et al., 2009: 21ff), "user-generated content" (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010), and "digital labour" (Terranova, 2000; Fuchs, 2014) have long since become com-

mon parlance. They are challenged and defended, changed and rearranged. A variety of approaches, theories, models and assumptions attach themselves to these concepts that focus on a diverse range of angles, including gender, ethnicity, class, subculture and group memberships from micro, meso and macro perspectives. With these come diverse philosophies and worldviews that often concern questions of activity, passivity and agency with regard to media use as well as media power.

Yet, whereas many of these approaches can be seen as responses to the renewed interest in, as well as centrality of, the individual media user, the conceptions of the *subject and subjectivity* underlying these works frequently remain implicit and in need of reflection and clarification. What is established by such "implicit notions" of subjectivity (Dahlgren, 2013: 72) is an idea of media users leaning strongly towards rationality, cognition, categorisation and assimilation. While, as mentioned above, consumer choices become ever finer grained to meet individual demand and while content is frequently tailored to meet the expectations, or suspicions, of political loyalists, the challenge that the resulting notions of individuality pose to our conceptions of the subject have only started to be confronted by media and communication research and related fields (see Wilson, 2010; Lupton, 2016; Bröckling, 2016).

In order to counter the tendency of foregoing the relevance of subjective experience and its impact on the social, Peter Dahlgren has recently advocated "reactivating concerns about the subject" (2013: 73) in media studies research, stating that researchers in the field also need to consider "communicative modes beyond the rational" (2013: 82). Heeding this call, psychoanalysis may be one, if not *the* discipline, best equipped to point to ways out of the rationalistic impasse. As Brown and Lunt suggest, "there is something about psychoanalysis that is corrosive to the whole model of the subject built up by the social identity tradition" (2002: 8) – i.e. the very tradition to which implicit models of the subject in media and communication studies frequently default.

This special issue understands itself as a critical appreciation of this "corrosiveness" of psychoanalytic theory as a productive potential for media and communication studies. With its diverse traditions – Freudian, Kleinian, Lacanian, Winnicottian, relational, etc. – foregrounding the conflicted, ambivalent, defended, divided, desirous, wishful, multifaceted, layered and processual aspects of human beings in their relations with others, psychoanalysis shifts our

attention to contradiction, incoherence, ambiguity, resistance and enjoyment in media texts and mediums as well as in our responses to them.

While psychoanalysis is primarily a clinical field, the application of theoretical and methodological concepts outside the consulting room has shown that they can be immensely fruitful and productive if the specificity of the social context in which they are used is kept in view. Thus, instead of colonising the social with the psychical, which was one of the cardinal mistakes of early psychoanalytic research, the focus is now firmly on the kinds of connections between the psychic and the social, the co-constitution of the psychic and the social and/or their mutual implication in one another (Hollway & Jefferson, 2000; Frosh, 2012).

As regards the in-depth study of this co-constitution, or mutual implication, of the psychic and the social, the media, media technologies and the user's relationship to these play a key role. In Western societies at the onset of the 21st century, questions regarding socialisation, individualisation and subjectivation can only thoroughly and satisfactorily be answered when we take our relations *in*, *through* and *with* media into consideration. In this respect, what is most striking from a psychoanalytic (but also from other, e.g. post-human and new materialist) perspective(s), is the movement of information and communication technology ever closer to the human body and into each and every aspect of everyday life. With the steady increase in computing power and a significant rise in wireless transmission rates, with devices becoming smaller, lighter, more mobile and ever more able to merge with the human body, a media sphere has developed that is rapidly becoming a major, integral influence on the ways in which we relate to and interact with others - ways that psychoanalysis holds to be vital for subjective development.

While the articles collected in this issue of *CM* each inquire into specific scenarios of and challenges resulting from this proximity and integrality, what follows is a more general inquiry into the relationship between the psychoanalytic unconscious and the current media situation. This assessment is followed by the introduction of the articles collected in this issue in the context of existing currents of psychoanalytically oriented research on digital media. We end the introduction with an outlook on the future of psychoanalytic media research.

2. Digital Media and the Psychoanalytic Unconscious

As briefly broached above, psychoanalysis is, first of all, a clinical method of treating mental illnesses that arise from intra- and intersubjective dynamics. Advances in psychoanalytic theory have always been closely tied to what would emerge from the interactions between analysand and analyst in the consulting room. From the very beginning, however, this mode of theory production became fertilised by analysts drawing on cultural materials and artefacts. When, in the decisive phase of the foundation of psychoanalysis, Freud reported to his friend, Wilhelm Fliess, that he had found in himself a strong love for his mother and jealousy towards his father, he immediately referred this finding to the "gripping power of *Oedipus Rex*" (Freud, 1962: 193), the antique stage drama by Sophocles (ca. 429–425 BC). Thereby, he connected a psychic insight with a literary character and, as Alfred Lorenzer (1986: 20) further pointed out, "implicitly equate[d] an unconscious experience with the impact of a literary work". In this way, then, cultural artefacts penetrated psychoanalytic theory and practice and, consequently, it did not take long before psychoanalysis started to venture into the realm of culture in return, with the founding of *Imago*, the "journal for the application of psychoanalysis in the human sciences", in 1912, giving these ventures a platform of their own. Subsequently, the psychoanalytic idiom began to sink into Western thinking, with people interpreting their own, as well as other's, behaviour in terms of repression, resistance, "Freudian slips" etc. Therefore, when we, in this special issue, aim at an assessment and reassessment of digital media from a psychoanalytic perspective, we position ourselves in the tradition of "psychoanalytic explorations" (Kris, 1952) in culture. However, due to the very penetration of psychoanalysis and its terminology into everyday life, this assessment must be done with a keen eye for the original theoretical formulations, the nuanced clinical uses of certain terms and the ongoing debates around them.[3]

Additionally, this self-reflexive turn is suggested by research on psychoanalytic concepts itself. As Drew Westen (1999) wrote in his overview of the scientific status of psychoanalytic concepts, "the most fundamental assumption of psychoanalytic theory and practice is no longer a matter of scientific debate.

[3] Furthermore, as Eli Zaretsky (2015) and others (e.g. Halpern, 2014) have pointed out, psychoanalysis is also in need of self-reflection since its paradigm has increasingly become intermixed with and contested by that of *cybernetics*. In other words, as our conceptions of subjectivity in its various contexts are in flux themselves, an assessment of digital media – a realm largely driven by cybernetic thinking – from a psychoanalytic perspective also needs to consider the implications of digital culture for psychoanalysis.

[…] The clear experimental documentation of unconscious thought, feeling, and motivation supports many aspects of psychoanalytic theory and practice" (1999: 1063). Having thus secured a scientific grounding for psychoanalysis, Westen continues his overview by listing various kinds of unconscious processes that the experimental literature has identified. While many of them fall inside the traditional psychoanalytic field of interest, some of them serve functions that diverge from those on which psychoanalysis has focused (Westen, 1999: 1063–1064). Westen therefore suggests a mutual opening of disciplines, so that academic disciplines become receptive of psychoanalytic insight, but also, vice versa, that psychoanalysis take on board the implications derived from findings made in other fields.

For the purposes of the present article, while we cannot follow Westen's appeal systematically, what we would like to take with us into our outline of psychoanalytic thinking in digital media studies are the following two points: While it is necessary (A) to think the unconscious and to think *with* the unconscious in media and communication studies, it is just as necessary to (B) approach and use traditional psychoanalytical terminology as a *heuristic* device and in a way that is committed, but never uncritically bound to this terminology. Thus, as indicated above, we want to conceive of the concepts and elements of psychoanalysis as open and malleable to the demands and implications of the field of digital media. In this spirit, we will now first give an outline of the psychoanalytic unconscious in order to then bring it in touch with the study of digital, online media.

2.1. The Psychoanalytic Unconscious

Without doubt, the most central aspect of psychoanalysis is the psychical conflict upon which the unconscious as well as the whole of psychoanalytic theory is based. In his definition, Stephen Frosh points out that the psychoanalytic unconscious

> "refers to the existence of ideas which are not just not being thought about (hence not just 'not in consciousness') but which are also radically *unavailable* to thought - they cannot be brought to awareness even if the person tries really hard, or at least it is more of a struggle than one person can manage on her or his own. These hidden ideas, however, have a profound influence on psychological life." (Frosh, 2002: 12–13)

Whereas experimental evidence refers us to the existence of various kinds of unconscious processes that are unconscious simply because they are not thought about but are otherwise unproblematically available to consciousness, the specificity of the psychoanalytic unconscious is that it cannot simply be activated and drawn into conscious, rational thinking. Instead, it is actively kept away from consciousness, because its contents are too toxic for the individual and too painful to bear and engage with.

At the same time, unconscious ideas by no means disappear or become entirely forgotten. Rather, as Frosh writes, although they are "hidden from awareness", they still remain "active ('dynamic'), pushing for release" (2002: 13). The process of *repression*, which becomes constitutive for the psychoanalytic unconscious, has to be an ongoing, continuous one. Not only must intolerable ideas be withdrawn from consciousness, they also have to be kept away from it "by continuing pressure" (2002: 15). As with a taboo that ties prohibition and attraction together in a tense relationship, the forbidden and forbidding nature of unconscious ideas exerts a strong attraction and it is the dialectical, conflictual relation between the desirable and the intolerable in one and the same idea that is constitutive of the psychoanalytic unconscious.

In his second topography, Freud captured the tense dynamic between desire and prohibition in a tripartite structure, namely, between the *Id*, i.e. the drives and their representations, and the *Superego*, i.e. the conscience function, with the *Ego* attempting to negotiate and strike a balance between the two with a view to remaining adapted to the demands of (social) reality. As the conflictual nature of the relationship between these three agencies suggests, the qualities and quantities by which adaptedness might be measured are open to negotiation and change. On the intrapsychical plane, these changes occur because we are neither always able to put in the effort that it takes to keep the unconscious in check nor always willing to do so – e.g. because we are mentally exhausted, under stress, in an overwhelming life situation, drunk or otherwise intoxicated, or simply, asleep. In these situations, the repressed unconscious can easily return to us and announce its existence in an abundance of ways, e.g. in dreams, parapraxes (characteristically called "Freudian slips") and in faulty, or even bizarre acts that, in social situations, create scenes about which we later might simply shake our heads. The frequently heard excuse of "I don't know what came over me", or "I wasn't myself in that moment" are typical ways of dissociating from the breaking through of aspects or traits that one might have been attempting to disown.

It is when looking back on embarrassing situations, such as those implied above, that we might obtain an insight into the existence of an afterlife of infantile thinking and acting – an afterlife that is part of the unconscious, since many of those ideas and scenes that we experience as so intolerable that they have to be repressed either stem from, or follow relational patterns, the foundations of which were laid in early childhood. As grown-ups, while we never encounter our unconscious – i.e. that which intolerably, unbearably belongs to us – in a completely unfiltered, undiminished way, our confrontations with it are of varied intensity. As Frosh writes,

> "there is, for example, sufficient censorship remaining in dreams to mean that little damage is usually done by them. But sometimes a crisis occurs, for example when the only way in which a tumultuous energy of unconscious life can be contained is to allow some of it expression in the form of neurotic symptoms." (2002: 23)

Similar to dreams, such symptomatic expressions function as openings into a person's unconscious. However, it is important not to understand them as pure and straightforward expressions of it; what is breaking through in symptoms is not a voice speaking directly from the "depths" of the unconscious. Rather, symptoms can be understood as compromise formations that organise and regulate psychic life by creating provisional outlets. The unconscious manifests itself, then, in expressions that are riddled with metaphors and metonymies, as well as the Ego's defensive attempts at keeping these expressions within the conventions of the normal. Anna Freud (1936/1984), in particular, devoted a significant part of her theoretical work to identifying and differentiating these defence mechanisms and naming them according to their functions, e.g. projection, identification, rationalisation etc. But other traditions, first and foremost that based on the works of Melanie Klein, have also identified mechanisms that have immense value for understanding psychic dynamics, such as splitting and projective identification (see e.g. Hinshelwood, 1991).

Due to these theoretical developments, the concept of repression is now being used in two different ways. On the one hand – and in its more general usage – it has become an umbrella term for the various mechanisms with which people attempt to fend off the anxiety that announces the breaking-through of the unconscious. After all, as Frosh (2002) states, "once the workings of repression are fully described, it becomes apparent that all defences have a similar func-

tion, which is to keep unconscious impulses at bay. So, every defence involves repression, and repression in the general language sense is what every defence does." (Frosh, 2002: 21) On the other hand – and in its more specific usage – repression becomes one defence mechanism amongst others, with all of them serving the Ego to retain homeostasis and a relatively workable and endurable mode of functioning. Yet, they achieve this in a way that is not completely harmless. The more established the defences against the threatening "return of the repressed" (Freud, 1915) become, the more the subject becomes caught up in the anxious abating of its conflicts, in a precarious, highly inhibiting management of unthinkable desires and life threatening prohibitions.

The clinical process of psychoanalysis is geared towards the analysand, in small steps taken in dialogue with the analyst, developing an awareness of exactly those patterns of thinking, feeling, relating to and interacting with others that continuously re-enact and reproduce the conflicts upon which his/her unconscious and its ensuing dynamics thrive. The ultimate aim is to make these patterns lose their efficacy and binding power. However, since the unconscious is a dynamic of thinking that is principally outside language, with unconscious ideas behaving more like things than words, and since psychoanalysis is a process in which language and speech are central for the acknowledgement of inner states, the unconscious can never be wholly captured, understood and explained in and through its efforts. Furthermore, analysands can never be completely 'healed' of the symptoms from which they suffer, nor should we hope for such a healing. After all, since it is also our unconscious that makes us who we are, a complete recovery would also mean a total change of personality.

Summarising our account so far: What distinguishes psychoanalytic from other kinds of unconscious processes is its dynamism – a dynamism that is based on a tense, conflicted relation between various psychic agencies, in the classic Freudian conception between the It, the Superego and the Ego, which might be translated as *desire*, *duty* and *reality*. The psychoanalytic unconscious is not so much a realm or place, but rather, should be conceived of as a process in which intolerable ideas and imaginations become withdrawn from consciousness. Becoming repressed, these imaginations then become constitutive of the unconscious, (a) because they need to be kept from becoming conscious on a continuous basis. And since this is not always possible or even desirable, unconscious ideas (b) make their presence known as symptoms that emerge in

different situations, ways and intensities. In this way, writes Frosh, unconscious ideas are also *causal* – they make us who we are and produce "much of the weft and warp of psychic life, its richness and its confusion" (Frosh, 2002: 13–15).

2.2. Thinking (with) the Unconscious in Digital Media

Arguably, continuing from the above, it is by no means obvious how the psychoanalytic unconscious in its dynamic complexity can be brought into play in the study of media content and form. That which is brought to the fore in clinical psychoanalysis, in the relation between analyst and analysand, seems to entail far too personal and intimate a knowledge as to pertain to the study of institutional and sociocultural practices. Since the psychoanalytic unconscious is constituted by that which is too painful for the individual to associate with and through the very act of keeping these thoughts, imaginations and experiences away from consciousness and from expression in the social, how could they ever have an impact upon the sociocultural at all? By the same token, however, the above question can also be turned on its head. Since our unconscious plays a vital part in who and what we are, not only in symptomatic expressions, but also by pushing our personal development into directions that emerge from the necessity to respond to and manage our conflicted and conflictual needs, it is indeed highly improbable that this unconscious, as it is shaped by the social, does not also play a vital role in shaping the social in return.

Questions regarding the exact relationship between the psychic and the social have been vexing researchers throughout the 20th century. Since the early attempts of the Frankfurt School, critical theorists have sought to combine sociological accounts of the workings of the social with psychoanalytic accounts of the workings of the human psyche. However, while straightforward attempts at coordinating these two poles have hardly ever been convincing – e.g. Herbert Marcuse's terms, such as "surplus-repression" (Marcuse, 1955), suggest to us somewhat too clear-cut equivalences – recent times have seen some far more sophisticated advances in mediating between the psychic and the social and we will touch upon them in our overview of the traditions of psychoanalytic thinking within media and communication below.

However, a limitation of many of these approaches is that their focus is very much on media *content* and its potential effects – a focus that comes at the expense of the media's *forms of mediation* themselves. In view of the ubiquity of digital media, shifting our attention to the specific ways of mediation and

their impact becomes increasingly important. With media technologies becoming ever more mobile and moving ever closer to the body as well as into things (which are thus turned into non-human actors), our interest in unconscious processes needs to be opened out to the question of how far and in what ways do these media themselves come to play a part in their audiences' subjectivities and, vice versa, how far and in what ways do audiences themselves come to play a part in the media's agency. Therefore, as the next step in this subchapter, we want to turn to the question of how we might describe a process of media socialisation (or even *subjectivation*) from the point of psychoanalytic theory.

2.2.1. "Online Disinhibition" - An Exemplary Case of Understanding the Digital Psychoanalytically

One scenario in which a process of 'media subjectivation' can be unfolded is offered by John Suler's now classic article on the "Online Disinhibition Effect" (2004). Suler presents six characteristic factors that shape the behaviour of users engaged in communicative practices facilitated by online environments. While some of these factors (they are: "anonymity", "invisibility", "asynchronicity", "solipsistic introjection", "dissociative imagination" and "minimisation of authority") are more promptly understandable than others, Suler's main drift is that all of them must be seen in relation to the loosening of ties with significant others in online interactions – a socio-technological tendency that Sherry Turkle unfolded in her seminal *Alone Together* (2011) and in subsequent publications (2015). In the scenarios that Suler describes, people act and interact without being burdened by the weight of their social identity and reputation and/or with significantly less consideration for tact and the emotional well-being of others. As Suler observes, these situations, although typical of specific online contexts, are also reminiscent of other social situations, particularly that of the psychoanalytic hour itself, to which Suler refers explicitly. Apropos the factor of "invisibility" he writes:

> "According to traditional psychoanalytic theory, the analyst sits behind the patient in order to remain a physically ambiguous figure, revealing no body language or facial expression, so that the patient has free range to discuss whatever he or she wants without feeling inhibited by how the analyst is physically reacting." (Suler, 2004: 322)

Suler holds that in many online environments, too, the absence of bodily signs in response to a user's actions allows this user to push his/her actions ever more into the direction of his/her prior dispositions and proclivities. Furthermore, when he claims that "people say and do things in cyberspace that they wouldn't ordinarily say and do in the face-to-face world", that "they loosen up, feel less restrained, and express themselves more openly" (2004: 321), this shows interesting correspondences with the most basic requirement in psychoanalysis, namely, that the analysand *freely associate* and give expression to whatever comes to mind (Freud, 1978).

We could continue our playful comparison of Suler's conception of online disinhibition with the psychoanalytic situation here. However, if we take seriously the correspondences between the two situations, then, the more interesting question to consider is what these correspondences imply for the psychoanalytic conception of the subject in these contexts of online disinhibition. Thus, when we take disinhibition to mean the loosening of repression and the emergence of freely associative modes of interaction, must we not expect to find a kind of subjectivity facilitated in these online environments that externalises its unconscious to a far greater extent than psychoanalytic theory could foresee? And, consequently, must we not expect to be confronted there with displays of the unconscious in a decisively rawer form than the concept of repression suggests?

Answering these questions for the specific cases of online disinhibition, it is worth returning to the differentiation between the two uses of the term repression. As stated above, whereas its narrower use points to the specific defence mechanism of repression by which an idea is withdrawn and kept away from consciousness, its more general use points to repression as an umbrella term for various kinds of mechanisms by which unconscious ideas are kept from an individual's awareness. With a view to incidences of online disinhibition, then, repression in the general sense can no longer be seen as performed by repression in the specific sense. Rather, Suler's text suggests that more *regressive*[4] forms of interaction will become commonplace, with less restrained and, indeed, less inhibiting defence mechanisms coming to the fore, e.g. *projection*, *acting out, splitting*, *idealisation* etc.

[4] We use "regressive" here in its non-pejorative, psychoanalytic sense of a return to less structured and differentiated modes of expression and interaction (see Laplanche & Pontalis, 1973: 436).

These changes at the interactional level have implications for our overall conception of subjectivity in these contexts, too. After all, if people change the ways in which they cope with anxiety, conflict and desire, this will have consequences for their whole way of being. Thus, in an attempt to capture the potential impact of online disinhibition on subjectivity, it becomes clear from our perspective that online subjectivity is now frequently less guarded and, as a consequence, more vulnerable to fragmentation, with the means to defend against such vulnerability having become more archaic and loud.

Yet, as regards this potential impact on subjectivity, we have to be careful not to colonise all online environments with the above theoretical speculations. Suggesting a vastly sceptical outlook on culture, the online disinhibition effect, as Suler conceives of it, finds an echo in Freud's bleak societal diagnosis in *Civilization and its Discontents* (1981) and its main thesis that natural human proclivities must be bound by a repressive culture so as to make coexistence at all possible. Along these lines, the introduction of the Internet in general would have to be seen as a dangerous step in a development leading to the loosening of repression on a global scale and to a general re-aggressivisation and re-sexualisation of social ties. To use this conception indiscriminately for all online practices and all relational cultures emerging from them would be a grave mistake.

Rather, while the phenomenon of online disinhibition finds most resonance in social media, online discussion forums and news boards, it seems just as possible to identify practices and environments with markedly different structures of feeling and with cultures in which users' relations to their media call for different theoretical reflections – as well as *in*flections. The vast field of fandoms and online fan cultures (e.g. Saito, 2011), for example, suggests cooperative and mutually supportive relationships in which ties to significant others are all but loosened and where different kinds of sexualities and, ultimately, subjectivities are being imagined and performed that have the potential to challenge set psychoanalytic expectations in ways that are different from the above.

In turn, when it comes to the field of corporate social networking sites, we can see that they afford forms of interaction that are disinhibiting and highly inhibiting at the same time. While the corporate desire for user-generated content brings forth ever new possibilities for the users to, in Suler's words, "loosen up […] and express themselves more openly" (2004: 321), this drive towards freely-associative material is countered and contradicted by the desire to attach these associations to the users' true identities (Hogan, 2013). What is being

suggested in this conflicted mixture of affordances is a form of subjectivity that comes with a strong orientation towards self-marketing and self-commodification and can well be seen as the fulfilment of what Adorno, with a view to the cultural industry, termed "psychoanalysis in reverse" (1954: 223).[5] However, whether or not users comply with this mode of self-fashioning and subjectivation is another matter. Clearly, a significant number of them are keenly aware of the corporate modes of surveillance in place on the sites. And while many users feel either increasingly inhibited to share information there (Marwick & boyd, 2011, 2014; Stutzman, Gross & Acquisti, 2012), or use ironic modes of compliance, there is also a proud tradition of subverting, or even sabotaging, the corporate interest in user creativity (e.g. Saco, 2002; boyd, 2014; Karppi, 2015; Phillips, 2015; Krüger, 2016). This tradition again holds potential for identification and subjectivation and goes to show that even those mechanisms that, at the relational level, have a defensive function, might have a sublimating, "progressive" effect at the sociocultural level.

Now, turning to the next subchapter of this introductory article, we will present this issue's contributions in the context of the broader currents of psychoanalytic media research from which they derive.

3. Mapping Psychoanalytic Research into Media and Communication

While it is safe to say that psychoanalysis leads a niche existence within most media and communication departments across the world today, with the authors discussed in this section representing a minority in the field, it is nevertheless possible to point to genealogies, or tentative lineages, of psychoanalytic media research. However, the following presentation of these lineages has been made for the sake of summary rather than to canonise authors into set traditions.

3.1. Critical Theory, Cultural Studies and Psychoanalysis

As briefly touched upon above, some of the first attempts to combine psychoanalytic and sociological thinking can be traced back to members of the Frankfurt School who sought to combine readings of Marx with Freud in order to critique capitalism and its inherent modes of domination, commodification

[5] Marcuse (1964/1991) points in a similar direction with his concept of "repressive desublimation". Also, in this respect, *Žižek's* critical reading of "cyberspace" as "the suspension of the master" (1997: 193ff) is still very current.

and exploitation, which they came to see as both grounded in structural forces as well as entangled in subjective processes (e.g. Fromm, 1941/1994); Marcuse, 1955; Horkheimer & Adorno, 1972; Adorno, 1975). All of them touched upon the media in their works to an extent. Perhaps it was Horkheimer and Adorno's chapter on the culture industry, in *The Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1972), that most famously conceptualised mass media as a form of affirmative pleasure – a pleasure that not only reproduced capitalism's relations of production but was also able to manipulate and shape audiences' tastes and desires. Horkheimer and Adorno's account of the media was received rather sceptically in Anglo-American academic circles where they were accused of conceptualising audiences as too uncritical, passive and pacified. It was British cultural studies in particular that argued for empirical investigations into audiences and how they made sense of the media. In the process, however, the discipline started to lose sight of and turned away from psychoanalysis (Hall, 1980; Morley, 1986; Grossberg, 1987; Couldry, 2000).

By contrast, in post-war Germany, the link between critical theory and psychoanalysis was revitalised by the second generation of the Frankfurt School. Major impulses came from the works of Alexander and Margarete Mitscherlich (1967/2007), the early Habermas (1972) and Alfred Lorenzer (e.g. 1970a, b). The latter in particular, through his works on depth-hermeneutics, offered a viable theoretical and methodological approach to cultural research from a psychoanalytic perspective that still exerts a strong influence on social and cultural research in Germany (see, e.g., König, 2006; Löchel, 2002). From a pragmatic, historical-materialist orientation, depth-hermeneutics conceives of the psychoanalytic concepts of the conscious and unconscious in terms of evolving forms of interaction that are either granted or not granted access to language and conscious modes of thinking. Since these forms evolve from earliest childhood, in repeated interactions between infant and caregiver, the social comes into the picture from the very beginning. As the caregiver is always already a social being, the interactional patterns that take shape in the infant through its encounters with her/him inevitably come to carry a psychic as well as a social dimension.

Vera King's article on the "Transformations of Shame in Digitalized Relationships" is rooted in this tradition. Based on open, unstructured interviews with mobile media users, her analysis captures the sociocultural implications

of the evolving media practices in dialogue with psychoanalytic and sociological theories of shame. What she finds in her article are "changes in the quality of relationships to physically present – yet communicatively absent – others" (p. 72). Specifically, the absence of shame from situations in which people use digital media while others are physically present points to a shift in relational practices on a sociocultural scale.

3.2. Feminist Media Studies

A number of feminist thinkers have and continue to engage with psychoanalytic ideas (Mulvey, 1975; de Lauretis, 1984; Doane, 1987; Copjec, 1989; Cowie, 1990; Silverman 1992). This tradition has primarily been connected to the medium of film and has often drawn on Lacanian theory to describe the ideological (unconscious) effects of cinema on spectators. Lacan posits that our first encounters with ourselves and others are pre-symbolic and of a visual nature. The baby sees herself in a mirror and mirrored through others' reactions towards her and, as a result, mis-perceives herself as a coherent, unified and rational being. The very act of perceiving the self as self is marked by a fundamental break between the I who perceives it*self* and the self that is perceived as an other. This relationship between the individual and his/her (imagined) other lies at the heart of Lacan's thinking. Laura Mulvey (1975), in turn, adapted Lacan's notion of the mirror stage and coupled it with his theory of the gaze. In her work on Hollywood cinema, she argued that cinema, in its ideological function to reproduce patriarchy, invariably presents female bodies from the perspective of the gaze of the film's male protagonist, so that the audience will unconsciously identify with this gaze and become interpellated by it.

Another tradition of media analysis that has become revitalised over the past decades and which builds strongly on Lacanian psychoanalysis is a version of discourse analysis. For this tradition Lacan's conceptualisations of the symbolic and of discourse are crucial. In his reinterpretation of Freud's unconscious as outside language, Lacan holds that the unconscious is actually a (side)product of our entry into language and the symbolic. Specifically, he ventures that from our first attempts at symbolising experience and desire, and articulating (signifying) these in language, there is something that must become excluded and remain unsaid. In fact, that which remains unsaid only comes into existence *as the unsaid* through our attempts at articulating 'it' as part of a signifying chain

in the first place. This unsaid – i.e. that which eludes symbolisation and only comes about through symbolisation – is the unconscious – an unconscious that, enigmatically, is outside and, at the same time, inside language.

The basic dependency of the Lacanian unconscious on language and the symbolic suggests a mode of analysing unconscious aspects in texts without necessarily relating these aspects to individual life-histories. Rather, each linguistic statement in its particular sociocultural context is seen here to evoke a realm of that which cannot be said, which comes to hover over a given scene, and it is this realm that Lacanian discourse analysis is geared to shed light upon. Ian Parker, the main proponent of this research direction, explicitly suggests "ready-made" media texts (Parker, 2010: 157) as a fertile material for this approach. In this way, one can say, the Lacanian analysis of media discourse manages to bypass the narrower biographical dimensions of the psychoanalytic unconscious by focusing on the more general workings of the symbolic. Arguably, this makes this approach less prone to speculations at the level of intimate, personal meanings. At the same time, however, its predominantly social interest makes it debatable as to whether its object of analysis still falls within the realm of the stricter psychoanalytic definition of the repressed unconscious.

Alison Horbury can be seen as being affiliated with this tradition. Her analysis of feminist discourses online is based on Lacan's (2007) conception of the four discourses and their structures. In her article, "Digital Feminisms and the Split Subject", she argues that digital feminist discourse most often takes the form of "the discourse of the hysteric" – a discourse that is inevitably directed towards the Other as "master". As Horbury shows, while this is a necessary discursive position, it also gets stuck in the power relations it seeks to attack. Since the Other is addressed as both the oppressor, but also, unconsciously, as the authority that is to acknowledge the struggle of the hysteric (for example in discourses touching upon patriarchy, toxic masculinity, or anti-feminism), this discourse conserves what it seeks to do away with. Moreover, the more established a given feminist position becomes, the more one can observe a shift in online discussions: the "discourse of the hysteric" becomes replaced by the "discourse of the university". Consecutively, the rhetoric of power shifts from the oppressed protesting against her oppression to a voice claiming authority through knowledge. However, this shift leads to further rifts in and between feminist groups. Since the knowledge that is granted authority is knowledge

about oppression, hysteric positions now emerge in response to this new feminist authority and in contestation over what kind of feminism shall be given a privileged epistemological position.

3.3. Queer Theory and Intersectional Studies

The fields of queer theory and intersectionality studies have also drawn on psychoanalysis when theorising the (queer) body. While there has been resistance to and critique of psychoanalysis, several scholars have made use of psychoanalytic concepts (e.g. Butler, 1990; Dean, 2000; Edelman, 2004; Watson, 2009; Ahmed, 2014). However, not many publications have specifically addressed the media through the prism of queer theory and psychoanalysis. An exception seems to be the evolving field of *porn studies,* which has shown a tendency to take psychoanalytic concepts into account, as various articles in the recently launched journal of the same title attest (Neville, 2015; Ryberg, 2015; Varghese, 2016).

In a way, **Diego Semerene's** article criss-crosses the field of queer, porn and media studies. Drawing ethnographically on sexual encounters in group settings, Semerene states that the "digitally assisted gangbang" (through hookup apps and websites) emerges at a particular point in time in which the male body is increasingly made visible online. This constant demand of digital representation puts this body at risk of phallic failure. The gangbang may be read as a cultural symptom where men unite in order to ward off this risk of fragility and (symbolic) impotence through engaging in sexual practices that put an other – primarily women as the gangbanged subjects – in the place of utter inferiority and victimhood. Ultimately, Semerene links these practices to the Freudian narrative of the "great misdeed" (Freud, 1981). Freud saw the initial act of civilisation in the primal horde killing the archfather – a collective act that initiated the sense of kinship among the group members and contained feelings of guilt. By inserting herself into the constellation of the gangbang as a t[rans]-girl, Semenere manages to subvert the phallocentrism of this descendant of the "great misdeed" and its socialising dynamics. With the victim's gender rendered ambiguous, the homoerotic and homosocial implications of the act come to the fore. By the same token, the t-girl becomes legitimated as female in this archaic act by being referred to as "she" or "her" by the male collective. Through the insertion of the t-girl, then, the gangbang is shown to effectively destabilise a

system of binary gendered bodies. Facilitated through digital media, it opens up a space for acts that disrupt the idea that the body is individual, rational and privately owned.

3.4. Studies of Networked and Mobile Media

Studies into mobile media (Elliott & Urry, 2010), gadgets (Krzych, 2010), as well as social media and subjectivity (Flisfeder, 2015; Zajc, 2015) have also shown an interest in psychoanalytic concepts. Again, many of these have drawn on the works of Jacques Lacan (often via the writings of Slavoj Žižek) in order to theorise Internet technology and the use of social media in general, as well as smartphones and applications in particular (Flisfeder & Willis, 2014). In her influential work on informational or communicative capitalism, Jodi Dean (2009, 2010) argues against the widely held belief that social media have contributed to more open and participatory forms of communication. Following Žižek, Dean holds that in contemporary online culture, symbolic efficiency, i.e. the Lacanian (1977) notion of the Symbolic Order, has been diminished. Instead, digital culture is characterised by circuits of the drive. According to Lacan, a drive does not pursue a specific goal, but rather follows an aim as a means in itself, circling around an object without ever capturing it. Communicative capitalism is being kept operative online through drive loops. Users are captured in networks of enjoyment, surveillance and production that do not satisfy a particular desire but merely capture and reproduce drive. "I enter. I click. I like. I poke. Drive circulates, round and round, producing satisfaction even as it misses its aim, even as it emerges in the plastic network of the decline of symbolic efficiency" (Dean, 2010: 60).

Christopher Gutierrez's article, "The Other Self in Free Fall: Anxiety and Automated Tracking Applications", in which he develops the Lacanian notions of affect and anxiety with regard to self-tracking applications, can be seen as a contribution to and continuation of Dean's work. In particular, he considers "self-tracking applications [to] represent a particular affective loop […] which drives a never-ending anxious attempt" (p. 111) to reunite the subject with itself. As Gutierrez points out, however, anxiety does not emerge from a self as object that is lacking or missing, but from the shock of finding an object where there should not be one. In the case of digital tracking applications, while the subject expects to encounter a gap between *itself* and its data, the tracking apps constantly seek to close this gap. The embodied self and digital self are conflated

and the apps promise that we can indeed behold of ourselves through them. When this promise becomes plausible, however, desire becomes conflated with anxiety and that which we long for comes to haunt us.

3.5. British Object Relations and Media Studies

The British psychoanalytic object relations school mostly revolves around the psychoanalysts Melanie Klein, D. W. Winnicott, Ronald Fairbairn and others who developed Freud's ideas. Briefly put, object relations mark a departure from Freud's one-person psychology towards a more relational and intersubjective approach that aims to take account of the multitude of relations and attachments that make up our "inner worlds". In relation to the media, it is Winnicott's terms and concepts in particular that have been taken up by media scholars. His notions of the "transitional object" and "potential space" (Winnicott, 2002) have been adapted in fan studies (Hills, 2002, 2005, 2014; Sandvoss, 2005), for example, in order to explore fans' relationships with their objects of fandom that often span decades and are of biographical as well as sociocultural significance. Furthermore, Candida Yates and Caroline Bainbridge's *Media and the Inner World* research network (e.g. Bainbridge & Yates, 2014) has been dedicated to interrogating the role of (object-relational) psychoanalysis in contemporary media cultures by bringing scholars, media practitioners and clinicians together.

Winnicott's concepts of the transitional object and potential space also take centre stage in **Candida Yates and Iain MacRury's** article "Framing the Mobile Phone: The Psychopathologies of an everyday Object". Reviewing the body of cultural research literature on the mobile phone as well as applications of the concept of "transitional object" in culture and media studies, Yates and MacRury work out how – and how far – the mobile phone can indeed be understood as "transitional" in Winnicott's sense. With the mobile blurring boundaries between "me" and "not-me", absence and presence, subject and object, work and free time, control and surveillance, they argue that it can be legitimately identified as a transitional object and understood as a way of expressing, reflecting on and enacting states and feelings linked to the unconscious and the potential space. However, this potentiating, transitional function can never be entirely taken for granted as regards our various attachment styles. Drawing on the work of Thomas Ogden (1992), the authors explicate both the healthy and pathological ways in which the potential of the mobile can become unfolded.

3.6. Trauma Theory and Media Studies

Sigmund Freud defined trauma as "an experience which within a short period of time presents the mind with an increase of stimulus too powerful to be dealt with or worked off in the normal way [...]" (Freud, 1961: 275). Along this line, we can think of trauma as a rupture in the subject, as something so profoundly life changing and threatening to the subject's coherence and well-being that the ego blocks images, memories or thoughts touching upon that event from entering consciousness. While, throughout the past decades, the notion of trauma has been developed and modified in various ways (see e.g. Felman & Laub, 1992; Caruth, 1995; Kaplan, 2005; Radstone, 2007; Leys, 2010; Meek, 2010; Pinchveski, 2012), the most recent development concerns work revolving around the idea of the "traumatic image" (Meek, 2010: 32). Specific events or images are either framed as traumatic by the media, or the media coverage itself is seen to have the potential to traumatise audiences. In his contribution, "Media Traumatization, Symbolic Wounds and Digital Culture", **Allen Meek** inquires into this idea in detail. Departing from Bettelheim's concept of the "symbolic wound" (1955), Meek explores the idea of collective trauma and how it manifests itself in contemporary digital culture. He traces the academic discussions of Geza Roheim's film *Subincision* (1937), which depicts subincision rites amongst an Aboriginal tribe, as well as subsequent research that drew on it. Meek argues that images that have traditionally been associated with trauma and, thus, with overwhelming, anxiety-provoking and paralysing effects, can now be observed being circulated online for various political purposes and with radically different psychosocial effects. Images such as the broadcasting of police violence on Facebook may be proactively captured by specific groups and used to challenge hegemonic power structures. Even ISIS videos of beheadings can be expected to have an identificatory appeal. Meek grounds his observations in Bruno Bettelheim's reading of Roheim's *Subincision*. In contrast to all later uses of the film in experimental stress and empathy tests, Bettelheim argued that the shocking, ritualistic wounds that the members of the tribe inflicted on each other should be appreciated for their participatory, self-transformative and collective dimensions of meaning. The idea of the symbolic wound that can be used for self-transformation, collective identification and group participation may, according to Meek, act as a corrective to the dominant idea of trauma as necessarily rendering a subject passive and as being inherently negative, stressful and disempowering.

3.7. Jungian and Post-Jungian Studies

While C. G. Jung started out in close collaboration with Freud, changes in his thinking led to him breaking away from the founding father of psychoanalysis, with their fundamental disagreements revolving around the role of libido and sexuality in the individual subject. In his own approach to psychoanalysis, which he subsequently unfolded, Jung emphasised the existence of a collective unconscious made up of commonly held memories and ideas transmitted from generation to generation. The notion of the archetype as the basic form of those transmissions became central to Jung's work and it is not surprising that film scholars over the years have drawn on Jungian ideas in their works (Hauke & Alister, 2000; Hockley, 2007; Singh, 2009, 2014; Hauke & Hockley, 2011; Izod & Dovalis, 2015). There are, however, few works on contemporary digital culture that make use of Jungian theory (Balick, 2014). A welcome exception is Greg Singh's article "YouTubers, Online Selves and the Performance Principle: Notes from a post-Jungian Perspective", which develops Jung's concept of "persona" in relation to popular YouTube vloggers. As Singh points out, Jung (1953, 1971) defined persona as "a psychological archetype of social adaptation" (p. 178) – something that can be understood as a fixed, routinised performance based on expectations of what is socially acceptable in a given context and society at large. While Jung stressed the danger of over-identifying with one's persona, Singh works out how such over-identification becomes inevitable in the context of Youtube and social media in general, where mechanisms of commodification and exploitation continuously encourage users to identify with their persona instead of the less defended parts of their subjectivities.

From a Jungian perspective, alienation in digital media thus approximates what Marcuse (1955) called the "performance principle". Singh makes this evident in his discussion of successful YouTube stars and their audiences: "If YouTubers themselves are conforming to the needs of the apparatus [i.e. the online platform, S.K. and J.J.] through content production and the performance of conventions associated with professional vlogging, YouTube end-users are also conforming to their own assigned roles as commodified objects." (p. 187).

3.8. Media Philosophy and Psychoanalysis

Coinciding with Singh's work, **Colin Campbell,** in his article, "A Digital Death Drive? Hubris and Learning in Psychoanalysis and Cybernetics", also draws on Herbert Marcuse's writings for his confrontation of the digital. Campbell approaches digital media from a perspective that results from his interest in both Freudian psychoanalysis and Batesonian cybernetics. Arguing that the idea of the digital has become a fetish in Western culture, he relates Bateson's notion of "hubris" to Freud's conceptualisation of the death drive. From the perspective of this comparison, he holds that the term "digital" now widely stands for – and, indeed, camouflages – a process of abstraction, cutting-up and fragmentation and an emptying out of a lived experience. "[T]he digital *fetish* numbs us to the profound relation between body and machine, technology and nature" (p. 199). The moment of hubris lies in the act of mistaking digital representation as the whole of lived experience – an act that approximates the workings of the Freudian death drive in that it follows "a craving for stillness and order and the cessation of tensions" (p. 204). In opposition to this thanatotic tendency in contemporary culture, Campbell promotes a utopian approach to the understanding of our lifeworld that combines Bateson's theory of learning with Marcuse's conception of Eros. As Campbell writes, such an approach would involve "a profound *analog-digital integration*, a quantum leap forward in the capacity of language and consciousness to map social experience richly, without forgetting the traumatic cut digital language applies" (p. 211).

Campbell's argument points us in the direction of media philosophy as a field that has also put forth productive accounts of contemporary life in digital media in which psychoanalytic thinking is combined with questions of epistemology and the ontology of media technology. Mark B. Hansen (2000, 2004, 2006), for example, has drawn on Sigmund Freud and Didier Anzieu in his writings on technology and new media, in which the use of psychoanalysis goes beyond questions of subjectivity and is deployed to reconceptualise technology itself. Similar questions have been explored in Bernard Stiegler's work on pharmacology that has made use of Freud and Winnicott, amongst others.

Related to the media philosophical approaches above, **Mike Featherstone's** article on the "Chaosmic Spasm" combines Stiegler's concern (2013) for forms of *care* and *carefulness* along Winnicott's lines with Guattari's (1995) and Berardi's (2015) conceptualisations of "chaosmosis" and the "chaosmic spasm".

All of these authors diagnose a hyper-acceleration of globalised and mediatised lifeworlds that is seen to result in a process of disorientation and de-subjectivisation. The individual subject is incapable of meaningfully situating itself in social, symbolic structures because of a symbolic order that has become commodified to a degree that reduces it to a carrier of quantitative value only. In the gradual intensification of this state, the notion of the spasm marks its climax as well a caesura, giving way to a utopian, hopeful moment of post-apocalyptic transformation and reparation.

4. The Future of Psychoanalytic Media Research

The notions of "transformation" and "reparation" give us our cues for the final part of this Introduction. On the basis of the above overview, we want to end here with a brief outlook on the future challenges for psychoanalytic explorations of media culture. Broadly, we identify three such challenges that may (indeed, *should*) also be read as potentials for development.

The first of these challenges concerns a shift in theories and methodologies that revolve around so-called "big data". Emerging disciplines such as digital sociology, digital humanities, software studies, science and technology studies, and computational social sciences are symptomatic of a general drive towards quantification in academia: terms such as "digital methods" often signify quantitative methods for providing data analytics of large datasets that have been extracted from social media with the help of automated software. This "digital positivism" (Fuchs, 2017: 4) – an empiricist fetishisation of data, algorithms and structural processes – comes at the expense of a focus on subjectivity, micro processes, forms of interaction, engagement and agency that threatens any theoretical exploration of notions of the subject or the media user more specifically. While we do not wish to dispute the manifold roles that data now play in our lives, responses to it must continue to take account of both *big and small* data, i.e. quantitative and qualitative frameworks. This is especially pertinent in the light of the possible changes in the nature of the unconscious itself with regard to the subject's situatedness within media in contemporary culture. If media are increasingly inhabiting all aspects of everyday life, the emerging question is how can we reconceptualise the conscious and unconscious relationalities between people and their evolving media technologies? We maintain that psychoanalysis is one of the disciplines that lends itself to researching such questions.

Thus, rather than merely arguing for a reconceptualisation of the *social* in the light of mediatisation processes, as Andreas Hepp and Nick Couldry (2016) have recently done, we argue for a reconceptualisation of the *psychosocial* dimensions that engulf, entangle and surround societies, individuals, structures and media spheres today. In this respect, turning our critique here into a positive call for future research, psychoanalytically-oriented researchers should be encouraged not to shy away from this drive towards the quantitative, but, on the contrary, to actively engage with it, interpret the data as well as the methods by which these data are gathered and processed and point towards the manifold ways in which our conceptions of subjectivity, relationality and sociality have bearings on the findings derived from the quantitative.

The second challenge revolves around psychoanalytic theory itself and its often contested status within academia. Frequently, we find New Materialist, Deleuzian and Foucauldian approaches (amongst others) to be conceived in rather stereotypical opposition to psychoanalysis – an opposition that does justice to neither field. Large parts of contemporary affect theories, for example, have established themselves in opposition to psychoanalysis and its perceived over-individualising viewpoint. While this may have been a rather hasty and reductive attempt at establishing a new terrain – affect studies – the question remains as to whether there is not significant potential within the various psychoanalytic theories that have the power to critique, contest, modify and, ultimately, *further* the above approaches. Offering the briefest of examples for this, our point is corroborated forcefully by Jacques Derrida (2001: 87), when he suggests in view of Foucault's critique of psychoanalysis that we might find "already in Freud, to say nothing of those who followed, discussed, transformed, and displaced him, the very resources of the objection levelled against […] the father of psychoanalysis". Again, turning this point of critique into a call for research, while there are many laudable impulses to be found in the present issue, further work is needed that criss-crosses theoretical fields and negotiates between psychoanalysis and other theoretical approaches – not in order to create false harmonies, but to determine in detail where the differences and contradictions between the fields lie.

Thirdly, and most importantly, what is needed is more hands-on, empirical research from a psychoanalytic and/or psychosocial perspective. Generally, while psychoanalytic theories can offer profound insights into media-cultural

processes from the micro to the macro level, we still have to improve the ways in which we bring these theories and their insights to the reality we seek to understand. In this respect, a substantial part of psychoanalytic media scholarship risks overwhelming its audience with a dense theoretical discourse that remains on a decisively abstract level. If psychoanalysis is to secure a place within media research, it needs to open itself up to other paradigms and, fundamentally, to empirical research. Questions around methodology and the extent to which psychoanalysis can be a method in social and cultural research are important in this respect (Johanssen, 2016a, b; Krüger, 2016). We believe that this issue of *CM* both addresses and illuminates the challenges and potential of psychoanalysis for digital media research today.

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Framing the Mobile Phone: The Psychopathologies of an Everyday Object

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Abstract: *This article proposes that the affective processes that shape our relationship to the world of digital consumption and communication can be illuminated further when viewed through a lens of object relations psychoanalysis. We focus on the use of the mobile phone as both an object in the world and of the psyche in order to reflect upon its uses as an evocative object that shapes the psychosocial boundaries of experience in everyday life. We argue that in contrast to the concepts of interpersonal communication that can be found in some domains of popular culture and in communication studies, object relations psychoanalysis can be usefully deployed in order to explore the unconscious attachments that develop in relation to consumer objects, allowing for the complexity of feeling and reflection that may emerge in relation to them and the potential spaces of the mind. The mobile phone's routine uses and characteristics are widely understood. At the same time, the mobile phone invites critical reflections that identify a paradoxical object of both creative and pathological use. Such reflexivity includes the mobile's relationship to the complexity of psychosocial experience within the contemporary cultural moment. Applying the ideas of psychoanalysts Donald Winnicott, Thomas Ogden and Christopher Bollas, we argue that one explanation for why the mobile phone continues to attract not only enthusiastic cultural commentary but also a degree of apprehension across academic and popular-discursive settings can be found in its capacity to both disrupt and connect as an object of attachment and as a means of unconscious escape.*

Keywords: *transitional object, potential space, pathology, mobile phone, object relations psychoanalysis*

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1. Mobile Anxieties: Overview of a Psychosocial Object

The mobile phone[3] is a complex cultural and technical object; singular, in that it can be held in the palm of the hand, but also multiple in scope, in terms of its functionality and in the personal and social significances attached to it. This technology forms at once a disruptive and containing intervention in contemporary psychosocial experience and a core component in shifts towards a more mobile society (Elliot & Urry, 2010). The mobile phone provides a major vector for *grasping* contemporary experience (cognitively, emotionally and practically) and it provokes some disruptions in the patterning of psychosocial and cultural life. Such disruptions invite anxiety and commentary, producing thinking and reflective analyses across public discourses that we propose are inflected by the unconscious emotional-intimate properties of the mobile-as-object. As we discuss, object relations psychoanalysis provides a highly evocative set of concepts to explore the contemporary experience of the mobile phone, which is bound up in the unconscious processes of object relating as a mode of experiencing the self and of engaging with the world.

The mobile (as we shall call it from here on) remains in the cultural limelight, not just through promotions-driven marketing, with slogans such as, "This changes everything", and "Inspire the World, Create the Future", produced by major manufacturers such as, Apple, Samsung and Microsoft, LG and Huawei, and via network providing retailers such as Vodaphone, EE and "3", but across news, comment and broader cultural conversations. The mobile provides an object for reflective and sometimes obsessive-seeming commentary across media. Recent headlines indicate typical preoccupations including: "Mobile phone addiction ruining relationships" (Alleyne, 2012), "How women love their mobile phones... more than their boyfriends" (Daily Mail Reporter, 2009), "Just Thinking About Your Cell Phone Makes You More Selfish" (Garber, 2012), "Mobile phones have changed the world, for better or worse" (Clark, 2015), "Do you have a love/hate relationship with your phone?" (Kunst, 2012), "Mobile addict parents guilty of child neglect" (Bingham, 2012) and "Nomophobia

[3] For this paper we have adopted the phrase "mobile phone" rather than the ostensibly more modern "smartphone" to refer to the devices under our investigation. Widespread usage of the term "smartphone" has largely been the result of journalistic and marketing rhetoric rather than clear demarcations between hardware and software platforms. As Kang & Son (2009: 919) note, "there is no clear industry-standard definition of smartphone". Consumers themselves are unlikely to talk about 'losing their *smartphone*', whereas 'where on earth did I leave my *mobile*?' is a modern *cri de cœur.*

affects majority of UK" (Royal Mail, 2008). These titles and their prevalence are partly a function of 'clickbait' culture, yet they also offer a sense that mobiles provide a recurrently anxious focus for lifestyle commentary, with the final one referencing a 'syndrome' called "nomophobia", to capture the idea that people fear losing their mobile phones.

2. Mobile Disruptions: Context and Critique

The mobile induces a more complex-seeming sociality, widening the communicative arrays and practical intersections that generate the global and local "networked individualism" that is characteristic of the contemporary period (Castells, 2007). In a more psychological register, the mobile is assertively individualistic in terms of its use. Connective as they are, mobiles are rarely *shared,* as such. An individual's phone clusters and invites personal attention. It stands as both a conduit for and an object of excitement; a mirror and a lamp, projecting and receiving informatic and affective material; a stage and a screen for everyday engagements and emotional attachments. Personal in this sense, the mobile is highly *personalised* via account settings, passwords and fingerprint recognition. The phone is also *personalising,* in part via the evolving (mobile) digital footprints and signatures of users – data and surveillance-based algorithmic constructions, binding 'persons' to mobile personae.

The symbolic and material significance is linked to wider power relations within the contemporary historical moment or "conjuncture"[4] (Hjorth, Burgess & Richardson, 2012). The mobile phone brings together key concerns that address notions of power and the construction of the subject in culture and it is helpful to think about the mobile as a "cultural formation" that shapes and is shaped by the affective experience of cultural life. Put simply, the mobile phone represents a developing inflection within contemporary structures of feeling. The mobile raises questions about identity and associated notions of agency, creativity and desire. Notably, the mobile opens up new capacities, facilitating modes of intimacy that are at once immediate and yet can seemingly transcend the limits of time and space (Díaz & Ekman, 2011; Hjorth & Lim, 2012).

On the other hand, the impulse to keep checking one's phone continues to be framed as a symptom of the anxious neoliberal subject of late modern capitalism (Giroux, 2015; Fisher, 2009, 2014; Elliot, 1996). Whilst contem-

[4] As with earlier studies of the Sony Walkman as an object of cultural consumption (Du Gay et al., 2013).

porary digital culture creates opportunities for privatised modes of escape and self-experience, it also contributes to the process of emotional governance and the unpaid labour of the neoliberal workplace, where one is continually available online (Serrano-Puche, 2015). So just as the mobile facilitates complex and fluid relationships it can also be viewed as an object that is used defensively in order to retreat into regressive psychological positions in which communication with the outside world can feel curtailed or surveilled, structured by globalised software companies such as Google and Microsoft.

3. An Evocative Object

We propose that one explanation for why the mobile retains its place as an object of fascination and as a continuing focus for thinking (as well as a source of worry) across academic and popular-discursive settings can be found in a psychoanalytically informed examination of the uses of the mobile as an object in everyday life and its role in shaping subjectivity. Beyond its cultural and practical-functional significance, the mobile carries powerful *unconscious* importance. Specifically, as an object, the mobile often serves as an index for the work (and play) of social, emotional and personal *attachment* (Bowlby, 2008; Winnicott, 1971). The mobile is a unique intervention in the endeavours of human relating and not (just) a disruptive new communications technology. The mobile forms for us, we suggest, a powerful unconscious representation of connection and disconnection, one that evokes thinking, analysis and commentary and conveys feelings that are redolent of the *Zeitgeist*.

We argue that object relations psychoanalysis has a useful role to play in helping to contextualise some of the concerns about the specific "problems" that have emerged around mobile phone consumption and use. As we have seen, in popular discourse, the enthusiastic and creative use of the mobile phone is also often shadowed by discourses identifying addiction, relationship breakdown, illiteracy, solipsistic mobile privatism and related, emergent psychosocial problems. We propose that the mobile has become, culturally, a particular kind of "evocative object", following Christopher Bollas's (2009) phraseology, also echoed in the work of Sherry Turkle (2011b). As we discuss, the mobile has become uniquely evocative of the present conjuncture in such a way as to inflect elements in the public discourse, but also in the sense that, as Bollas puts it, it forces us "to think and think again" (Bollas, 2009: 85–6) about psychosocial experience.

4. An Object for Psychoanalysis

Psychoanalytical ideas offer perspectives to enrich some of the main theoretical framings through which academic analysis seeks to understand and evaluate mobile cultures and human relations. There has of late been a turn to object relations psychoanalysis (Bainbridge & Yates, 2014) that emphasises the realm of maternal phantasy within a relational paradigm that places the processes of relating to objects at its heart and therefore offers a relevant set of emphases for thinking about one's relationship to the mobile phone. The 'object relations' approaches developed by, amongst others, Melanie Klein (1937, 1946) and Donald Winnicott (1971), and further extended and explored by Thomas Ogden (1992) offer a useful idiom for thinking about the mobile. Winnicott, in particular, stressed the importance of *attachments*,[5] and of the first relationship between the infant and its mother for the shaping of selfhood and identity.

Object relations perspectives help to capture the complexities of networked intersubjective life whilst holding on to an account of interior experience in a unique way. As Ogden argues:

> "Object relations theory, often erroneously thought to be an exclusively interpersonal theory that diverts attention from the unconscious, [is] in fact fundamentally a theory of unconscious internal object relations in dynamic interplay with current interpersonal experience." (Ogden, 1986: 131)

This strand of psychoanalytic thinking offers an understanding of 'objects' and 'spaces' that is well equipped for grasping the instability and paradoxical qualities of the mobile and its uses, specifically, as we will now propose, via Winnicott's conceptions of potential space and transitional objects.

5. Paradoxes and "Transitional Objects"

Frequently identified as "paradoxical" (Eco, 2014; Fortunati, 2002; Fortunati & Taipale, 2014; Elliot & Urry, 2010), the mobile's phenomenological presence nags at functional analytical categories. The mobile is so frequently identified as "paradoxical" because it plays at boundaries. At the levels of practice and the imagination, the mobile mixes up presence and absence, me/not-

[5] Despite some tensions in their relationship, Winnicott was influenced by Bowlby's attachment theory, developed in the early 1950s (Kahr, 2016; Bowlby, 2008) – an approach that has continuing relevance and which in turn has influenced Didier Anzieu and other non-Lacanian psychoanalytic theorists.

me, subject and object; and it seems to mix these things up in *us*. Such mixing can provoke anxieties. As observed, the mobile is *continuous* with us, precious, and, in some sense a McLuhanesque "extension" (McLuhan, 1964). At the same time, it also stands as a distinct "object".

After exploring and clarifying the meanings and uses of D. W. Winnicott's concepts of the "transitional object" and the "potential space", we will identify some of the varieties of pathological distortion experienced in them – distortions also frequently evoked in discourses around the mobile phone.

5.1. The "Transitional Object"

Typically working by analogy with Winnicott's (1971) approach (one that is based on nursery and clinical work, (Kahr, 2016)), the mobile can be seen as having some similarities with the "special" objects found and, in an important sense, "created" (Winnicott, 1971: 96) by young children in the play of development and becoming, the fabled favourited toy or piece of material. As Winnicott sets it out, for the baby, the physical object concerned in this work hardly matters: "perhaps a bundle of wool or the corner of a blanket or eiderdown, or a word or tune, or a mannerism," but (nevertheless) the transitional object "becomes vitally important to the infant" (Winnicott, 1971:2; see also Kahr, 2016[6]). The object is important in the formation of the self and in the separation and connection between the object-world and the world of internal objects, a "third part of the life of a human being, a part that we cannot ignore …an intermediate area of experiencing, to which inner reality and external life both contribute" (Winnicott, 1971: 2).

The transitional object indexes a prefiguring ground for some of the work of separation and attachment (Bowlby, 2008), but also for an enduring existential frame stretching beyond infancy. "The use of an object symbolises the union of two now separate things, baby and mother, *at the point in time and space of the initiation of their state of separateness*" (Winnicott, 1971: 97, Italics in original). The transitional object, and the developmental achievements entailed in the use made of this object[7] are, subsequently, vitally important to human development – to living. As Winnicott outlines:

[6] Kahr refers to Arthur Miller's children's story *Jane's Blanket* as a well rendered account of the transitional object. Winnicott himself mentions Charles M Schultz's *Peanuts* cartoons and A. A Milne's *Winnie the Pooh* as helpful cultural reference points.

[7] As Winnicott tries to clarify: "what I am referring to in this part of my work is not the cloth or the teddy bear that the baby uses – not so much the object used as the use of the object" (Winnicott, 1971: xi).

"I have introduced the terms "transitional objects" and "transitional phenomena" for designation of the intermediate area of experience, between the thumb and the teddy bear, between the oral erotism and the true object-relationship, between primary creative activity and projection of what has already been introjected, between primary unawareness of indebtedness and the acknowledgement of indebtedness." (Winnicott, 1971: 2)

The transitional object, and the use made of that object,[8] is the beginning of "cultural experience" (Winnicott 1971: 100) but, also, an opening up of a space for highly valued, developmental achievements, that include: reciprocity, creativity and what he describes as "a capacity for concern" (Winnicott, 1963).

A final developmental element in this narrative is that the transitional object prefigures the attainment of another significant and paradoxical achievement: *the capacity to be alone in the presence of the mother*. This "capacity to be alone" (Winnicott, 1958) marks a subtle specification for creative, independent and engaged living. In the intensively connected mobile world the fragile link between creative aloneness and psychosocial belonging remains a perennial theme, which is explored, for instance, in Sherry Turkle's *Alone Together* (2011), an echoic reframing of Riesman's classic *The Lonely Crowd* (1950) for a mobile-digital age. We suggest that, because of this ongoing thematic, there is a renewed resonance of "transitional objects" in the analytical conversation regarding mobiles within the frame of the present conjuncture.

We propose that the mobile phone is a kind of objectual[9] realization of this conception of a "transitional object", a practical figuration of this "special", "first" object. As a major part of thinking about "culture" and experience, the mobile is also a prop in individuals' continuing dramatic enactment of another key idea: "potential space". The mobile phone enacts and dramatizes "potential space" and (as such) it invites interpretations that seek to analyse the (paradoxical) "potential space" spoken of in object relations psychoanalysis. As Ogden puts it:

"The transitional object is a symbol for this separateness in unity, unity in separateness. The transitional object is at the same time the infant (the om-

[8] To underline, emphasis is given to, "not so much the object used as the use of the object" (Winnicott, 1971).

[9] "Objectual" is a term deployed see Knorr (2008) and see also Woodward's highly relevant (2011) conception-definition: "Objectual things are handled and used, powerfully combining embodied pragmatics with emotion, cultural myth and symbolism…" (Woodward, 2011: 367).

> nipotently created extension of himself) and not the infant (an object he has discovered that is outside of his omnipotent control). The appearance of a relationship with a transitional object is not simply a milestone in the process of separation-individuation. The relationship with the transitional object is as significantly a reflection of the development of the capacity to maintain a psychological dialectical process." (Ogden, 1992: 228)

What we propose is that when people talk about mobile phones, they are exploring psychological processes entailed in potential space. The discourse around mobiles is indexical to a deeper set of anxieties adumbrating experiences of, and capacities to experience, potential space.

6. Exploring Mobile Transitions

Some applications of the idea of "transitional objects" have set out to help think about media, material and cultural consumption (see, for example, Turkle 2011; 2013; Silverstone & Hirsh, 1992; Hills, 2007; Woodward, 2011; Whitty & Carr, 2003; Kuhn, 2013; Johnson, 2010). However, sometimes, the accounts that focus on the mobile phone underemphasise the unconscious dimension in favour of a more interpersonal conception of the use of mobiles as objects that focus on the *here and now* rather than evoking resonances with early infant experiences (Ling, 2007, drawing on Silverstone & Hirsh, 1992; Ribak, 2009; Kullman, 2010; Johnson, 2010). These studies have applied the notion of the "transitional object" within an ethnographic framework that seeks to understand the place of technology within the delicate nexus of attachments, separations, and entanglements characteristic of specific social contemporary domains such as love (Johnson, 2010), family life (Ribak, 2009), school journeys (Kullman, 2010) and "adolescent emancipation" (Ling, 2007). In these cases, the mobile becomes a means in the practical and emotional management of separation and development. For example, Ling examines

> "the dialectic nature of mobile phone use by teens. On the one hand it serves as a greatly extended umbilical cord or in the phrase of Roger Silverstone, a "transitional object" (Silverstone, Hirsch, & Morley, 1991), but on the other hand it plays into the emancipation process of adolescents." (Ling, 2007: 61).

Ribak (2009) extends the umbilical cord metaphor, but adds in the idea of "remote control", and situates the mobile in a set of triangular relationships marking the parent, technology and the child. Ribak makes a detailed and convincing analogy with the transitional object and yet ultimately rejects a too direct comparison on a number of practical grounds. Kullman's (2010) geographic approach adds a helpful Latourian twist, recognising that the mobile is but one component in an assemblage of transitional objects (bags, books, toys) used by tween children nervously navigating early journeys in third spaces between home and school and depending on flexible adaption between adult and child. She notes that "essential for this flexibility is the most common technology among children – the mobile phone" (Kullman, 2010: 837).

The conception of the mobile as a "transitional object" now colours contemporary popular discourse. For instance, business guru, Margaret Heffernan (2013) writes:

> "The cell phone has become the adult's transitional object, replacing the toddler's teddy bear for comfort and a sense of belonging. We clutch phones to show that we do know at least one other person – that we might look solitary but we have connections. We are important because we might get called about something crucial – or, at least, non-trivial. We count in the world. Our insecurity may be laughable but our response isn't." (Heffernan, 2013)

Aaron Balick (2016), who has written extensively on digital cultures from an object relations perspective (2013), writes in his insightful blog, in more nuanced terms, that, as a culture, we, "have re-invented the transitional object – only rather than a furry blanket or a teddy bear, it's a smartphone". He adds some thought-provoking advice for his readers:

> "So next time you absentmindedly reach into your pocket for your smartphone – pause for a second and think. What am I actually searching for? You may find that at bottom there's a niggling sense of insecurity – and you just want to check to make sure someone else on the planet is thinking of you." (Balick, 2016)[10]

[10] http://www.aaronbalick.com/blog/checking-your-smartphone-again-its-an-object-of-emotional-supply/, accessed 10 December, 2016.

7. Potential Space: The Psychosomatic Underpinning for Attachment, Culture and Communication

The idea of a transitional object is clearly an appealing one in the various contexts identified above. It offers an insight in ethnographic analyses (Ling, 2007; Kullman, 2010), even when important reservations are set down (Ribak, 2009).[11] The observation of the transitional object typically highlights its character as an "intermediary" part of real world usage – correlating neatly with the phone's practical-communications functions. However, this vision can occlude the *unconscious* underpinning identified in the original literature and the psychoanalytic observation of transitional objects. It also understates the peculiar place of the object, its location in a fluid nexus of related conceptions, most notably Winnicott's ideas of transitional phenomena and potential space. As a result, when the metaphor is transplanted into everyday scenarios, some aspects of things identified as "transitional objects" suffer a diminution in meaning. The "transitional object" becomes, more straightforwardly, an *intermediary* object, either marking developmental stages (a prop in the transition to independence) or a point of connection in interpersonal relationships.

The unconscious component of experience in respect of the transitional object is at risk of being forgotten about. Sometimes, the transitional object becomes identified as a "regressive" object because it is associated with infancy but is used by adults. Yet, in Winnicott's conceptions, the transitional object is a component in normal, ongoing healthy development and is linked with lifelong "cultural" capacities and creative object relations. Furthermore, focusing on the object and its intermediary function, rather than on the (unconscious) use of the object, can occlude recognition of the pathological meanings and uses that may underlie the activities of intermediation. These misconceptions can arise if the object – as in the example of the mobile – is thought about independently of the connected ideas of transitional phenomena and potential spaces.

[11] Ribak qualifies the metaphor in a number of ways, partly linked to her focus on teenagers and parents, and concludes: "the mobile phone is not 'transitional' in the way teddy bears and blankets are, since it provides an actual link to the mother: it is less of a symbolic object and more, a means of communication" (Ribak, 2009: 192).

8. From Transitional Object to Potential Space

In the object relations view, the transitional object's intermediary role is linked to and embedded within an interplay of both external *and* inner spaces of the self – so here we propose an attentiveness to psychoanalytical uses of the term that seek to acknowledge more fully the unconscious aspects of (transitional) experience. Winnicott indicates what he means by this:

> "Of every individual who has reached the stage of being a unit with a limiting membrane and an outside and an inside, it can be said that there is an inner reality to that individual, an inner world that can be rich or poor and can be at peace or in a state of war." (Winnicott, 1971: 2)

To think about "inner and outer experiences", and "me-not-me experiences," an "area" is invoked (as it were) between inner (First) and outer (Second) areas:

> "the third part of the life of a human being, a part that we cannot ignore, is an intermediate area of experiencing, to which inner reality and external life both contribute. It is an area that is not challenged, because no claim is made on its behalf except that it shall exist as a resting-place for the individual engaged in the perpetual human task of keeping inner and outer reality separate yet interrelated." (Winnicott, 1971: 2)

He continues:

> "I am concerned with the first possession", [i.e. the "transitional object" and, also and at the same time], "with the intermediate *area* between the subjective and that which is objectively perceived." (1971: 3 italics added)

The term, "area" is important here, as it underlines that the transitional object (and its use) represent and enact an incidence of and within a "space". Winnicott talks about this idea of an existential "resting place" within "being" and of the idea of "potential space", thereby indicating something of the basic-ontological value of experience in and of this space. Psychoanalyst, Robert Rodman clarifies:

> "Experiences in the area of potential space allow us to have periods of rest from the struggle to draw lines between ourselves and others. …There is a built-in strain in human life caused by the need to maintain a line that

> defines us as separate from others. This line need not confuse and exhaust the baby in possession of a transitional object, and a mother who understands his or her need for a particular kind of comfort. The resting place thus given continues to play the same role in the successive stages of human development." (Rodman, in Winnicott, 2005: xiv)

We propose that the mobile's capacity to represent and to index this "resting place" and the disruptions entailed to it is a notable component in our ongoing experience of neoliberal subjectivities, cultures and social milieus and the negotiation of meanings in these contexts.

Winnicott underlines that the transitional object cannot be, exclusively, the focus within this conceptual framing. It has a part to play, one that in terms of the object itself, recedes into the past, but which includes and is included in a legacy of capacities and dispositions linked to "transitional phenomena" and "potential space". As the child develops,

> "the transitional object loses meaning, and this is because the transitional phenomena have become diffused, have become spread out over the whole intermediate territory between 'inner psychic reality' and 'the external world as perceived by two persons in common', that is to say, over the whole cultural field." (Winnicott 1971: 5)

Highly abstract (and "hypothetical") as it is, "potential space" allows us to apprehend a somatic inter-and intra-subjective achievement linked to the earliest phases of development (Ogden, 1986: 131). Its place in infancy does not relegate "potential space" to "the past". Nor does its origin in neonatal development render its contribution to experience, infantile or regressive. Instead, "potential space" remains a generative pre-condition that continues in growth, going on framing present (adult and maturational) psychosocial capacities and experiences – creative and re-creative, "ordinary" (Winnicott, 1971) and "human" (Ogden, 1992).

Potential space is always-already preliminary to development, yet it is also necessary to any future generativity. Its formation engenders within the development of any individual, a pre-forming within the emerging relationship that occurs "between the baby and the object (mother or part of mother)" (Winnicott, 1971:107). What we grasp, in "potential space", is something of the dynamic conditionality imbricating the emergence of subjective experience; one whose (primitive) legacy continues into and throughout the future life of the subject.

It is both intermediation and the intimation of a frame for relationality. It opens up the *ground* against which any subjectivity that might become, must initially, be *figured* (out). This emergence is a core component of the experience of separation, the "phase of the repudiation of the object as not me, that is, at the end of being merged with the object" (Winnicott, 1971: 107). As such, "potential space" forms and informs the matrix-template through which experience (thoughts, feelings and symbols) become articulated (see Ogden, 1992). It is part of processes of detachment, setting the tone for future dialogic achievements: attachments and separations. It becomes, for Winnicott, the basis for our most valued capacities: playing, concentration, creativity, and "cultural" living (Winnicott, 1971: 95–110).

"Potential space" evokes an interstice and an interlude; peculiarly empty and full and linking being to becoming. As Winnicott puts it: "Potential space" is an "intermediate area of experiencing" (1971: 2) that lies between the inner world, "inner psychic reality" (1971: 5), and "actual or external reality" (1971: 41). This conception offers a grasp of a subtle unconscious dynamic, paradoxical connection-disconnection: "Potential space both joins and separates the infant (child, or adult) and the mother (object), it lies in the paradoxical moment where "continuity is giving place to contiguity" (Winnicott, 1971: 101).

Potential space can be understood, then, as a psychosomatic, unconscious underpinning for attachment, culture and communication – with, we suggest, the mobile functioning as a powerful enactor of, and vector for and within such capacities. This change of emphasis from primary attention upon the transitional object itself, places it within the nexus of unconscious experiencing facilitated as well as represented by the potential space. This shift of perspective also helps us to understand the discourse around mobile phones more fully. We propose that the prevalent conversation across a number of discursive areas about the mobile is not just to do with its characteristic similarity to the transitional object alone, but, instead is due to its taking a place in the cultural imagination that is unconsciously and practically evocative of the transitional object *and* potential space. As such, the mobile affords and can be understood as a means to reflect on, express and occasionally act out feelings and emotions linked to unconscious experience in these terms.

Put simply, the mobile phone becomes emblematic of and a useful way to think about our ongoing experience of connection and disconnection within the social world. As has been well documented, this social experience, which is

characterised by risk (Beck, 1992) and the flux and change of liquid modernity (Bauman, 2007), also includes anxiety and anomie.

9. Pathologies of Potential Space

Alongside what might be called the "healthy", "life-enhancing" uses of transitional objects and potential space, there is also a recognition of obverses: an inhibition or seduction connoting either the under or exaggerated use of the object (Winnicott, 1971: 15–25). The pathological use of transitional phenomena may be expressed in relation to the emergence or non-emergence of creative capacities, failures in separation and the various instabilities that also characterise this "space" (Kahr, 1996, 2016; Spelman & Thomson-Salo, 2014; Ogden, 1992). Winnicott (1971: 15–20) offers a valuable clinical vignette that helps to grasp the unconscious anxieties underpinning exaggerated or pathological use of a seeming-transitional object.

Following "a short clinical example of a boy's use of string",[12] Winnicott (1971: 16) describes a 7-year-old boy who played obsessively with string. He discerned deep-seated concerns linked to anxiety about separation and a depressed mother. Winnicott concludes:

> "String can be looked upon as an extension of all other techniques of communication. String joins, just as it also helps in the wrapping up of objects and in the holding of unintegrated material. In this respect string has a symbolic meaning for everyone; an exaggeration of the use of string can easily belong to the beginnings of a sense of insecurity or the idea of a lack of communication. In this particular case it is possible to detect abnormality creeping into the boy's use of string, and it is important to find a way of stating the change which might lead to its use becoming perverted." (Winnicott, 1971: 19)

We might say the same about mobiles – they invite us to look at them and they seem to evoke a sense of (all) other techniques of communication. As such, and in the face of, say, exaggerated use, we might recognise some aspect of perversion creeping into the use of this object, too. Winnicott's intimation (above) of such "perversion" is, we propose, connected to cultural concerns about psychosocial experience. As we argue, the mobile affords a means to express existential and unconscious anxieties.

[12] And here, we cannot but recall the old-fashioned telephone games played with cans and string.

10. Pathologies Examined and Exemplified

Thomas Ogden has outlined ways of thinking about specific "pathologies of potential space" (Ogden, 1992). Healthy potential space can be fragile. It can even "collapse". Ogden's (1992) contribution is useful, then, in articulating something of the vicissitudes of such "collapses" and seeking to specify the characteristic dynamics of such pathologies. Ogden (1992) carefully articulates the ways that potential space can fail to fully sustain dialogical capacities for (object) relating between inner and outer experience. He describes the various disruptions in potential space, seeking to clarify Winnicott's account of potential space, and to examine patients' difficulties, while at the same time providing a useful proto-typology of disruptions in the formation and experience of transitional objects and potential spaces. This can be represented in a diagram (Fig 1.0), although, necessarily, any such representation simplifies the experiences being explored.

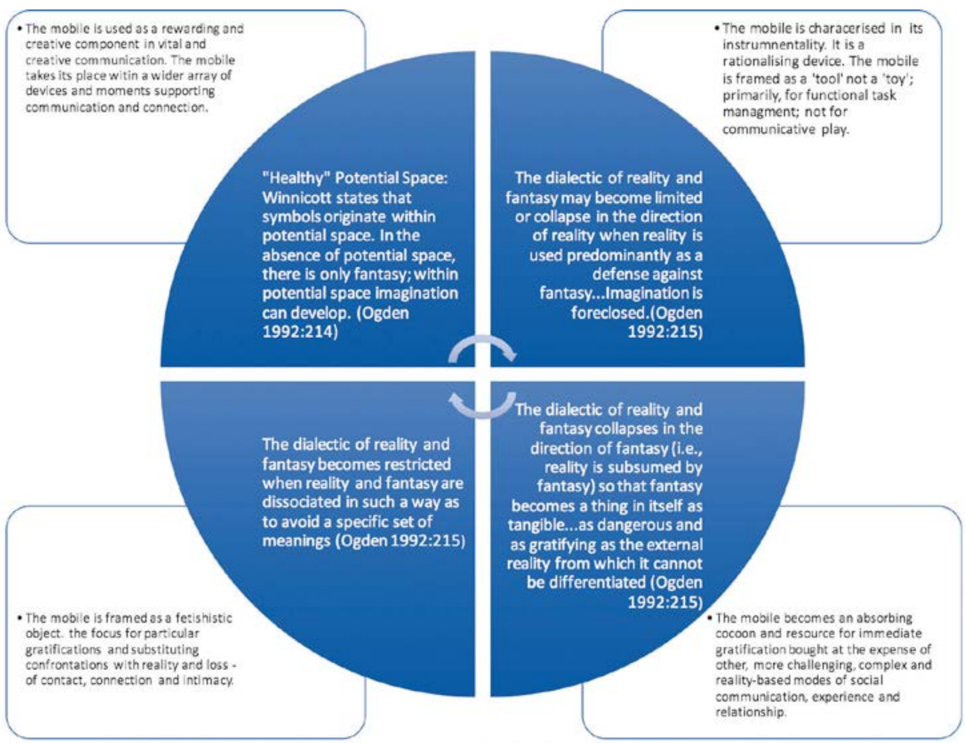


Figure 1.0 Pathologies of potential space evoked in discourses around mobile phones.

We suggest that the mobile, and critical reflection upon its meaning and use can be framed within the terms of these characteristic pathologies, which we will present and discuss in detail below.

10. 1. Disturbance: Collapse into Fantasy

Ogden's first "disturbance" is set out as follows: "The dialectic of reality and fantasy collapses in the direction of fantasy (i.e. reality is subsumed by fantasy) so that fantasy becomes a thing in itself" (Ogden, 1992: 229).

By way of illustrating this disturbance in relation to the mobile, we might think of the use of the phone as a kind of cocoon, as identified by Mizuko Ito et al. (2009).

> "Cocoons are micro-places built through private, individually controlled infrastructures, temporarily appropriating public space for personal use. […] These cocoons also have specific temporal features, functioning as mechanisms for 'filling' or 'killing' in-between time when people are inhabiting or moving through places within where they are not interested in fully engaging." (Ito et al., in Ling, 2009: 74)

This idea of the phone affording a fantasy "cocoon" or fantasy bubble is a frequent feature within discourses around mobility – the mobile virtual bubble 'becoming' the "real" world and amplifying solipsistic involvements. In contrast to engagements with other materialities, the mobile, because of its intimate proximity and animate character, can be experienced in a more seamless fashion as being, in some sense, part of the self. It can be viewed as facilitating the creative entanglement of subject and object and of inner and outer worlds. And yet, this merging with the object is sometimes viewed negatively as creating or amplifying a privatised, self-obsessed mode of existence (Music, 2014; Abraham, Pocheptsova & Ferraro, 2012). This seems to be affirmed by Konrath, O'Brien, and Hsing (2016), who note that declines in college students' empathy coincided with the rise of social media and mobile phone usage.

The above accounts propose a form of "digital narcissism" (Bainbridge & Yates, 2014) and affirm Sherry Turkle's (2011a) well known suggestion that in a digital age, we are all "alone together". The superficial and narcissistic dimensions of one's relationship to the mobile phone in this context is anticipated in Frederic Jameson's (1991) work, which highlights superficial and "depthless" aspects of postmodern culture, a critique, which as we discuss below, remains

influential within cultural studies' approaches to the mobile phone and digital culture more widely.

10. 2. Disturbance: Collapse into Reality

Ogden's second disturbance is characterised in these terms: "The dialectic of reality and fantasy may become limited or collapse in the direction of reality when reality is used predominantly as a defense against fantasy… Imagination is foreclosed" (Ogden, 1992: 229).

This disturbance finds its actualization in relation to the mobile in scenarios when its use becomes radically instrumental. Thinking about and experiencing the array of communicative possibilities afforded by the mobile is then supplanted by a restricted and restricting sense of its rational functionality. There is a closing down or an inhibition in the use of some mobile potentials. Here, we may think, also, of the self-critique, or censorships, that become attached to some forms of mobile use, those that restrict the desire to explore new spaces or "dangerous'" uses – and are defended against by an appeal to "real" communications or environments. The phone is apprehended primarily as a functional thing in itself rather than a means of connection and human communication or intimacy. The mobile phone becomes (in imagination or reflecting real arrangements in some cases) overwhelmingly a "work" object rather than a space for "playful" engagement. Anxieties about mixing work and leisure-play related usage can become exaggerated. Owning dual or multiple mobiles is a means to manage such anxiety, with some practical developments designed to institute a formal division between the playful-expansive as opposed to the work-a-day-instrumental aspects of the phone (Metz, 2015). Such anxieties are sometimes expressed in terms of phone security (Abrahams, 2014).

We might also think here of non-use – as in the distrust of phones and apprehensions about "going mobile" in respect of intimate aspects of life (Davidson, 2013). For some, mobiles stand simply as practical objects, transactional in use, and thought about, primarily in the frames of data plans and call charges. But the mobile is placed within boundaries set, to a degree, against intimacy and with suspicions about the quality or authenticity of mobile intersubjective life. In extreme instances, the mobile becomes implicated in a feeling of "switching off" and, in psychosocial terms, becomes the objective correlative of a sense of disconnection.

10. 3. Disturbance: Avoiding Specific Meanings

A third disturbance in the dynamics of potential space is described by Ogden as follows: “The dialectic of reality and fantasy becomes restricted when reality and fantasy are disassociated in such a way as to avoid a specific set of meanings, e.g., the ‘splitting of the ego’ in fetishism” (Ogden, 1992: 230).

Again, mobiles, and talk about mobiles, can remind us of such patterns, for instance in the recognition and misrecognition of intimacy, within which the mobile can become implicated. Jukka Jouhki (2009) notes the blend of psychological and somatic attachment and its fetishistic character, highlighting the ‘haptic’ aspects of mobile experience. If we continue to further analyse the haptic quality of the bond, the device could be viewed as a modern day magical fetish. The mobile in all its rewarding tactility and controlled aesthetic frames becomes the place where excitation and apprehension (erotic and intimate) can be experienced and shared (e.g. via sexting and photography (Drouin & Landgraff, 2012)) at the expense of other connections and channels. The risk evoked is that some degree of the experience of real, intimate, messy and risky human relating is foreclosed in favour of a fixation privileging the mobile screen.

In a more technical form of fetishism that echoes Menzies-Lyth’s (1988) work on social defences against anxiety, research on medics’ use of mobiles indicates the powerful-extensional role the mobile can play, becoming a repository for medical knowledge and, as an extension of medical training, a support for medical decision-making. It is even a convenient instrument for medical testing. In the same way that the stethoscope has traditionally been both an extension of the doctor’s ear and a symbol of the doctor’s knowledge (of data gathering and interpretation), the mobile phone represents a far more potent extension of the physician’s senses and learning. It becomes a new interface with the world under investigation at the same time as it helps to establish a relationship with the dynamic storehouse of medical knowledge and protocol. The risk is that the mobile interface dehumanises the matrix of care afforded by the doctor, rather than enhancing it.

What connects these evaluations of the mobile as pathological is that they propose and seek to help clarify a variety of forms of disturbed psychosocial attachment. Ogden (1992: 224–232) draws on Hannah Segal’s (1957/1990) notion of “Symbolic Equation”, which implies the negation of “thirdness” and a capacity to experience psychological complexity that such pathologies of po-

tential space entail.[13] In commentary and casual reflection the mobile serves as a powerful metaphor and metonym for thinking about wider and more deep-seated anxieties derived from emergent, complex and disruptive socialities. However, in some instances the metaphor or metonym becomes overpowering – and the mobile is not held in mind but demonised as a cultural 'bad object'.

> "With limited capacity to distinguish symbol and symbolized, that which is perceived is unmediated by subjectivity (a sense of oneself as creator of meanings). The upshot is that perceptions carry with them an impersonal imperative for action and must be gotten rid of, clung to, concealed, hidden from, put into someone else, worshipped, shattered, etc. What the person cannot do is understand." (Ogden 1992: 217)

Cultural reflections on the mobile certainly include and open up insightful analysis. These analyses are energised to varying degrees by more primitive anxiousness. Such reflections reframe the mobile, as we seek to understand its complex materiality and significance and re-produce it as an object, variously, for "worship", "clinging", "rejection" and "concealment".

11. Discussion: Mobile Objects in Culture

From an object relations perspective, many of the negative readings of the mobile phone's cultural effects that we have presented, evoke a state of mind that is unable to mourn and think about the losses of late modernity associated with the rapid transformations that have accompanied the evolution of new technologies and the greater mobility and also instability that such technological change represents. It is easy to see the mobile at the vanguard of such changes and it is not surprising, therefore, that it becomes framed as both a catalyst and cause of increasing disturbance.

The unthinking repetitive use of the mobile, which is often referred to as an "addiction" in popular discourse and which is echoed in the pathologies of attachment discussed above, is also alluded to in Cultural Studies literature about the mobile, although it is not referred to explicitly in psychoanalytic terms. And

[13] Segal (1990) distinguishes between "symbol formation proper" and "symbolic equation", noting the distinction between relations to symbols as supporting interpretive meaning-making (i.e. understanding that this symbol might stand for that referent in this context), versus an experience of symbolism that concretely equates the symbol with the thing it seems to stand for, i.e. this symbol *is* the thing referred to. For instance, one might reasonably say my mobile is a representation of my friendships, but, in a (mad) panic, feel, when a phone is lost, that we have (actually) lost all our friends.

yet, descriptions of the obsessional attraction and repeated use of the mobile by some cultural studies commentators seem to describe an unmediated need rather than an active desire for the object. For example, Mark Fisher describes the "demands of the digital" and links the mobile phone's appeal to the hedonistic world of internet pornography and Viagra as the related modern drug of choice, because "they dispense with seduction and aim directly at pleasure" (2009: 178). [14] Citing Fredric Jameson's (1991) critique of postmodernism as characterised by a vacuous recycling of the past, Fisher says that the communicational intrusions of 21st century digital media and the smart technology of mobile phones demand that we "remain in constant touch" (Agar, 2004). Fisher looks back at the Walkman, which was once used as an object of escape and he contrasts it with the all-consuming digitally induced instant pleasures of the mobile. Fisher says that we experience a "digital realm", representing a "superficial ….newness" (2009: 229). At the same time, we use the phone as a way to forget that we are stuck within a temporary zone in which culture recycles the past, always engaged but never connected.

Cultural Studies privileges an account of contemporary digital culture that cannot process the past and move on. Instead, it perpetuates a culture of pastiche and a *faux* mode of "nostalgia", as Jameson (1991) once said, and the current newest digital technology becomes a way of "refurbishing the old" (Fisher, 2014: 13). Here, it is argued that the digital realm of the mobile and our relationship to it articulates a mode of pathology that manifests a sense of repetition and alienation. In contrast to the relational possibilities of smart phone technology, the mobile is viewed here negatively as a symptom of neoliberalism, which as a cultural formation is also bound up with the end of history as a potential space for meaningful change. The repetitive use of the mobile echoes the stuckness of that wider cultural system and its use becomes a way to shore up a self that cannot mourn or let go of the past. The pathologies of potential space in this context are thus related to fetishism, obsession and a wish to revisit a version of the past that functions as a means to ward off that which cannot be let go or symbolised.

[14] We learnt of the sad news of Mark Fisher's recent death after this article had gone to press, The authors wish to acknowledge the valuable thought-provoking contributions of Mark Fisher to the field of Cultural Studies and to the analysis of shifting technological and cultural formations. His insights into the social and political costs of cultural disruption have influenced and inspired many important interventions in the study of the contemporary moment – not least in relation to understanding the mobile phone.

12. Finding New Spaces for Intimacy and Connection

There is a recurrent tendency in the analyses of mobile culture to articulate concerns in which the mobile becomes an indexical symbol of deeper anxieties about the experience of disconnection and loss within the late modern world. Such an account is a legitimate response to the mobile phone in a neoliberal age where the practices and values of instrumentalism disembed and redistribute affective and intimate relationships in both space and time and where the mobile seems to offer an insufficient substitute for other intimacies that have been lost or re-routed. Nevertheless, such a response risks overstating the negative impact of mobile technology in the contemporary era. The tantalising qualities of the mobile evoke desires for meaningful connection as represented in those discursive domains where more optimistic accounts of the mobile connote a more complex, multi-layered relationship between self, object and the outside world. In such contexts, it seems that the mobile enables an experience of intimacy to emerge that escapes the narcissistic impulse for mastery that is often said to shape communication today (Turkle, 2011). Instead, the new modes of intimacy that are implied here sit well with Winnicott's (1971) relational paradigm of transitional phenomena, which emphasises the process of meaningful and life-enhancing interaction with an/other. Ogden's theoretical assumptions regarding the dialectics of potential space can be applied in this context insofar that the mobile functions as a bridge between Ogden's notion of "the interpreting subject" and the M/other in which the triangular dynamics of symbolisation operate and occur (1992: 213).

This relational model of communication taps into an alternative notion of the mobile subject where the negotiation of time and space are said to play a key role in reflexive subjectivity and in forming relationships with others (Tachi, Kitner & Crawford, 2012). From this perspective, the experience of the mobile opens up new spaces for creativity and the extension of the self, in which the old boundaries of time, space and otherness can be transcended in order to create new intimacies and discover new ways of relating with one another across media platforms. This more nuanced account of subjectivity and communication is, in part, analogous to Ogden's developmental schema of the child's "transformation of unity into thirdness" (Ogden, 1992: 216) whereby the child moves from a state of being merged with the mother into one of separation, when the experience of thirdness emerges. Yet, as Ogden says, the experience of separa-

tion is not a fixed state but rather an on-going, dialectic process, in which the child (and later the adult) never separates completely from the first object but instead reworks that relationship in different contexts.

The temporal and spatial aspects of using the mobile in a fast-moving globalised world thus allow the development of new conceptions of the reflexive, "mobile self" (Elliott & Urry, 2010). From this perspective, the mobile phone functions as a portable extension of that self, shaped by a "technological unconscious" that enables the subject to negotiate "the productive possibilities" of an international "networked world" (Elliott & Urry, 2010). In this scenario, the "productive possibilities" of a networked environment can be seen as analogous to Winnicott and Ogden's model of the facilitating good mother. Here, one can argue that when internalising the possibilities that she (the mother) represents, the interpreting subject (the user of the mobile) moves in a fluid fashion between oedipal and pre-oedipal modes of being, thereby challenging the duality that has hitherto sustained a split gendered mode of relating to the world. The mobile can thus been seen as both contributing to and functioning within a nexus of psychosocial and technological relations that unsettle older, vertical structures of selfhood and communication and instead enable horizontal modes of relating where the dialectic of potential space can operate.

13. Conclusion

Throughout this article, we have argued that Winnicott's theories of transitional phenomena take on new meaning in a networked society where the experience of mediatisation and the fluid processes of communication that stem from it become bound up with the relational dynamics of everyday life. The mobile stands as a useful figuration of the "transitional object" – a specific instantiation of the idea of transitional phenomena. Winnicott's writings bring to life the significance of play for the early development of subjectivity and also for the capacity to play with objects and ideas in later life. The deformations and difficulties associated with transitional objects and potential spaces allow us to extend the analogy with mobiles to incorporate an understanding of the vicissitudes of mobile cultures, which include: addictions, anxieties about surveillance, cultural distraction, and the seductions and dangers of the "exposure" of self through the use of the mobile-as-subjective-object. Taking an object

relations perspective allows us to draw on such ideas in order to unpack the relational dynamics of the mobile phone and its uses.

Our relationship to external objects such as the mobile is always psychological, always psychosocial (Bainbridge & Yates, 2012, 2014). In other words, our relationship to the mobile is shaped continually by the experience of potential space and of coming into being and the processes of imagination, fantasy, emotion and identification. As an object of both pleasure and frustration, the symbolism of the mobile phone is significant because it is evocative of a deeply held wish for meaningful connection within the precarious setting of the late modern world.

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"If you show your real face, you'll lose 10 000 followers" – The Gaze of the Other and Transformations of Shame in Digitalized Relationships

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Abstract: *This essay examines the significance and transformation of shame in the context of digitalization, in particular, the psychosocial and psychological consequences of shifts in the boundaries between public and private manifest in the contemporary digital world. Moreover, it will examine the dynamic relationships of shame, humiliation and shamelessness as they develop in digital environments characterized by the dissolution of physical and communicative presence, as well as the, in turn, changing functions, ambivalences and affective pitfalls of self-presentation. On the basis of descriptions and commentaries by contemporary adolescents on the significance of social networks and on their own digital self-presentation, it will identify mechanisms for dealing with the imagined, projected or abnegated gaze of the other in the net.*

Keywords: *digitalization, shame, transformation of shame in digitalized relationships, gaze of the other, digital shame*

The consequences of digitalization for the development of the psyche and the construction of subjectivity are a matter of intense debate. While some emphasize the dangers of digitalization with incisive metaphors like "digital dementia" (Spitzer, 2012), others, such as Altmeyer (2016), make the argument that the contemporary digital age offers the opportunity to "present yourself to

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others in order to receive more attention … and affirmation" (14). The Internet, Altmeyer maintains, has turned out to be "a social resonance system" (15).

This essay is less concerned with normative observations than with the analysis of the psychic significance of self-presentation and communication in digital worlds, and the associated transformations of shame in digitalized relationships. The latter refers not to the frequently discussed phenomenon of lowering thresholds of shame, i.e. revealing oneself and sharing the intimate details of one's life publically on the net. Rather, the focus, here, is on the more crucial transformations in configurations of shame brought about by changes in the meaning of the *gaze of the other* in the context of the digitalization of communication and life practices, as well as associated changes to the relations between the self and other.[2] Thus this essay will examine changes in the relation to others, as well as to the self, in a communicative context in which the gaze of the other is directed, concretely and figuratively, towards an image of the self generated through the use of media. The article will further discuss changes in the quality of relationships to physically present – yet communicatively absent – others.[3] For example, children often experience primary caretakers, who share the same physical space, but whose attention is frequently directed towards mobile and digital devices, or third-persons, resulting in greater fragmentation of the parent-child interaction and the relationship, as a whole. Psychoanalytic concepts regarding the construction of subjectivity and the significance of shame in the development of the psyche provide insightful tools for the analysis of the transformations now common to growing up in the wake of digitalization.

The essay will, first, sketch some thoughts on the particular situation on the net, wherein the other is both omnipresent and ephemeral (1), before turning

[2] In a broad sense, the self constitutes itself in the mirror and through the resonance of the other. Experiences with the other are fundamental to the development of the psyche, for self-image and identity. As a result, the (type and quality of) interactions of the self and other are at the centre of various social and psychological theories that conceptualize the constitution of subjectivity, psychological, social and mental development (see section 2 of this article). "We are what we are through our relationship to others", maintains G. H. Mead (1934/1973: 430). "What the individual is for himself is not something that he invented. It is what his significant others have come to ...treat him as being", as Goffman (1972: 327) writes, as an extension of Mead. For the understanding of shame, experience of the self with significant others plays an essential role. Compare Seidler's theory of shame (2000; 2014), which references the prominent theory laid out in *self*-psychology (e.g. Broucek, 1991 or Goldberg, 1991), as well as to Sartre's notion of the "Gaze of the Other" in *L´etre et le néant* (1943). The relationships of self and other are central for the constitution of subjectivity and shame (as well as for the transformations in the scope of digital relationships).

[3] On the relationship between presence and absence in communication, see also Turkle (2011), Baym (2010), Gergen (2002).

in the next section to a discussion of the psychoanalytic (development-theoretical), social-psychological and sociological aspects of shame and the gaze of the other (2). Thereafter, it will look at practical examples of changed constellations in the relation of self and other in the context of digitalization (3). These will illuminate the effects of what media theorists refer to as POPC, the state of being "*permanently online, permanently connected*" (Vorderer et al., 2016) and of subsequent alterations in face-to-face communication on a.) parent-child interaction, and b.) interaction with members of the adolescent peer group. This discussion will be used as the basis for examining the changed form, practice and significance of the phenomenon of "see and be seen," and of self-presentation and being observed in social networks. Particular attention will be paid to the explicit orientation of this behaviour towards success, efficiency and profit, in the broader sense of the "entrepreneurial logic" (Bröckling, 2016) of self-presentation on the net (4): Excerpts from interviews conducted with adolescents, in which young men and women explain their methods of, and motivations for, posting images of themselves on social networks, illustrate the "entrepreneurial" and psychic significance of being-seen and not-being seen or not being-'liked'. The essay concludes with the identification of emerging variants of shame in digitalized relational contexts and shifts in the meaning of shame.

1. The Other in the Vastness of the Net – Omnipresent, Yet Physically Absent and Uncertain

For the majority of adolescents, but not only adolescents, communication takes place largely through digital networks, with others or an other, who is not physically present, yet whose physical absence is tied to a virtual permanence. In a peculiar way, the other is always and never there. There is a permanent connection to physically distant people, whose perpetual medial presence is a virtual precondition of the connection, though it is not necessarily or, in fact, continually guaranteed – like a person lurking in the background, who may or may not be watching. For, at some point, he or she, or the others, will, perhaps, read the message, look at the posted photos, the selfies and posts, or the text messages and emails, or follow the Twitter messages, hashtags and endless stream of communications in the various Whatsapp groups – all the things that happened while you slept or had to 'tune out' for a second to watch for cars as you crossed the street. But, sometimes the other(s) might be looking at the

very moment "I" am writing. "Are you there?" is the typical call, as we enter the vague and uncertain space of the net, appealing to an echo, we might say, the call of the always-present-yet-never-unequivocally-there other of digital communication.

Correspondingly, the significance of the real, physically present other vacillates and declines; behaviour towards physically present others and the gaze of the other transform in a physically immediate and symbolic sense. Face-to-face communication is partially supplemented and partially replaced by net-based or medial communication, whereby, on the whole – that is, through the increase in digital communication – relationships take on different forms. For example, face-to-face communication is often accompanied by parallel medial communication, so that, one might say, the inner, mental representation and relationship of presence and absence, of separateness and relatedness, as well as the various meanings of the gaze of the other, transform in very fundamental ways. So, too, does the significance of seeing and being seen, of self-presentation and being observed in social networks. There, the gaze of the other takes on a different quality, generating new constellations of shame. In this regard, selected psychoanalytic, social-psychological and sociological aspects of shame will be outlined below.

2. Shame and the Gaze of the Other – Psychoanalytic, Social-Psychological and Sociological Approaches

The self is constructed through the gaze of the other. Shame derives from the awareness of this relation. Sartre describes this experience pointedly in *Being and Nothingness* (1943), where he writes, "[S]hame is a unitary apprehension with three dimensions: "*I* am ashamed of *myself* before the *Other*" (289). G. H. Seidler (2000) extends Sartre's constellation of shame in his book on the analysis and psychoanalysis of shame, entitled *In Others' Eyes. An Analysis of Shame.* In his conception of shame and *alterity,* Seidler distinguishes between three structural levels of shame: Whether someone a.) "is able to be genuinely self-reflective", or b.) if self-reflection "requires the real presence of an external observer", or c.) is "shamelessly 'naïve' vis-à-vis" the gaze of the other (Seidler, 2014: 827). The capacity for shame also reflects the level of structural development of the psyche. While shame may be a response to the experience of objectification, or take on a distressing or even pathological character, in this

perspective it is not merely a negative phenomenon, nor merely a potent and meaningful intrapsychic affect impacting our sense of self-worth. It also serves to protect us from and bind us to the other (Scheff, 2010).

Shame, in other words, performs two operations simultaneously. Like the two sides of a coin, it is both a model of psychological development and the construction of subjectivity. For in the gaze of the other, the I recognizes itself, its value, and becomes aware of its self. This fundamental constellation of self-evolution in the mirror and through the resonance of the other (Winnicott, 1965) can be formulated in various theoretical positions emphasizing different aspects of the process – object relations theory, or the findings of infant research, as well as attachment and mentalization theory, intersubjective and recognition theory. According to Kohut (1971), the self delineates itself, in the best case, within the shine of the mother's eyes (141). The gaze of the other, then, is a mirror of the self, but more than simply a reflection, as new meaning is continually produced in the interaction and mutual relation. Shame is a developmental-psychological aspect of this process. It points to the dialectic of successfully proving oneself and the potential for failure in the gaze of the significant other. At the same time, it reveals the self's dependence on the related and affirming other and on the constructive relational experiences out of which the developing childhood self emerges and the adult self draws its psychic energy.

The possibility of shame, the potential to feel ashamed, then, is a constitutive and indispensable part of this constellation of dependency from which we cannot escape. For without the gaze of the other, the child's world remains empty and their psychological development is impeded. This is how the Subject affirms itself in the eye and gaze of the other, the one who "sees and recognizes", who gives affection and affirmation. For the self, this gaze of the other bears important emotional consequences. Love and appreciation produce a balanced satisfaction with oneself and pride, while indifference and rejection produce insecurity and a fearful, unstable sense of self, resulting, in some cases, in the compensatory attempt to make oneself independent through increased self-centredness or exaggerated feelings of grandiosity. Like pride, shame is an affect closely connected to narcissism, to the sense of self and self-esteem at a basal level (Hilgers, 2012).[4]

[4] Development theoretical and psychoanalytic approaches often understand shame as an indication of a discrepancy between the I and the Ideal-I, and guilt as a discrepancy between the I and the Super-ego (Piers & Singer, 1953). Following Steiner (1985), shame becomes meaningful in relation to the observing object, guilt in relation to the desired object.

Sociological approaches point out that the experience of shame is related to social conditions: When, why and how shame is experienced or triggered is dependent upon a number of different cultural and historical circumstances (Neckel, 1991), as well as on the social and psychological constellations of self and others. As M. Lewis (1992) maintains, guilt is characteristic of a competitive, individualistic, capitalist society, while shame takes on a particular, even regulatory function in precapitalist, ethnic and traditional societies. Losing one's credibility or honour, or falling into disgrace can mean social death.[5] More recent scholarship, however, argues that shame has become more significant in late Modernity, as a result of the pressure on the individual to perform, optimize and continually push boundaries. Consequently, we see an ever greater discrepancy between the I and the Ideal-I, which, as A. Ehrenberg (2009) suggests, can increase the tendency toward depression.[6]

As this essay contends, the idea and meaning of (the gaze of) the other changes in *the wake of digitalization*, lending a different quality to the phenomenon of shame. Furthermore, it will provide a selection of descriptions of the various constellations of shame, humiliation and shamelessness, as they emerge through forms of digital communication characterized by the dissolution of physical and communicative presence. On the one hand, there is the *digitally-absorbed gaze* of the *physically present other* and, in consequence, the thinned out and fragile communication and attention to physically co-present persons; on the other, there is the *greater significance* of the gaze of the physically absent other onto the medially-constructed image of the self.

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[5] Norbert Elias' theses (2000) on the civilization process have been most commonly understood that in this process the thresholds of shame increase and shame is increasingly internalized. As Wouters (1999) determined, for example, a contrary tendency developed, by the end of the 19th century at the latest, in which the public demonstration and presentation of things once painstakingly concealed (especially those of a sexual nature) were no longer taboo. There is an evident shift in the boundaries of shame. It almost goes without saying that this shift has experienced greater expansion through the *World Wide Web*. This essay is not concerned, however, with questions of sexuality and taboo in the public space of the net.

[6] An overview of psychoanalytic theories of shame is available in Seidler (2000, 2014), Hilgers (2012); on the history and discussion of a sociology of shame, see Scheff (2010), who defines shame as "the premier social emotion" (84), as well as Neckel (1991) and Greiner (2015).

3. The Digitally Absorbed Gaze of the Physically Present Other

3.1. The Gaze of Father and Mother at the Smartphone

In a society shaped by digitalization, communication with physically absent people has grown increasingly significant, so that, meanwhile, physical presence is no guarantee of communicative attention. The spaces of secure, undisturbed face-to-face exchange have become more seldom and fragile. Such spaces can only be created with a concerted effort to keep our permanent availability from interrupting the conversation, distracting our attention from one another. In the German state of Hessen, billboards remind parents to talk to their children rather than "chat" with others while with their kids.[7]

Digitalization creates the expectation and the illusion of omnipresence in digital communication. Yet, our permanent availability in the private sphere leads to the fragmentation of our face-to-face, immediately connected interaction and, in turn, the tendency toward shifts in significance, which are unintentional and often go unnoticed. Guilt and shame can be the consequences, for example, when, despite self-expectations and good intentions, we still do not manage to sustain our attention towards our children and avoid digital "distraction":

> "Sunday morning, any given amateur football field in Germany. Football with fathers and their children. Your own son has been looking forward to this all week. So have you. Then, you stand on the field and somehow play football, but you are an empty shell, not really there, because your thoughts are somewhere else. You are thinking of the email you got from your supervisor at work just before the game started… Then you go back home and ask yourself why, once again, at least this time, you weren't completely into the game. Why you weren't able to relax. And then you see the Smartphone lying there, its red light blinking incessantly, and reach for it. You read and begin to type. You don't hear your son ask if you saw the goal he made. Every mail, every quick SMS is a little betrayal: another minute sacrificed for work, even though you had promised *this* weekend to really spend time with your family…" (Borst & Wefing, 2014: 2)

[7] The motto and central message of the billboard campaign in Frankfurt a. M. 2015, showing images of mothers and fathers looking at their smartphones or talking on their cellphone while with their children, read: "Talk to your child *instead*"; cf. also Turkle (2011).

The father describes his regret for betraying his son but cannot change the situation: A moment later, he is already digitally distracted once again. F. Opitz (2012) describes a similar situation in his film *Speed* and his book by the same name. Opitz interviewed a journalist after the latter had prescribed himself a period of "rehab" from the Internet and his Blackberry, because his behaviour with these technologies "had become creepy" and he was ashamed of it: "If my phone vibrated and I was with other people … and it was embarrassing to look at it …, I would go the bathroom quickly to look at the message" (Optiz, 2012: 64). Similar situations occurred more and more frequently within the family: *When I came home at night, the first thing I did was turn on the computer."* Or, *"the Blackberry – a devil's tool* (63). *My kids were furious at the thing. Rightfully so … 'cause I was always looking at the screen while talking to them, at the same time, real quick, just to check my emails* (74).

While feelings of shame predominate in these examples, in some cases, the blurring of lines between work and private life is not experienced as burdensome or as a shameful communicative shortcoming vis-à-vis one's children. On the contrary, the feeling of being or needing to be permanently available is accompanied by a sense of importance, of being irreplaceable, by the desire for self-superiority that admits no feelings of shame:

> Florian K.,[8] for example, an enthusiastic self-optimizer, explains how he keeps a log, so he knows …*down to the minute precisely how much of his day is free-time and how much is work time … though, at the end of the day, it's not that accurate, because … well, when I am … at home sitting in my son's room playing with him and my cellphone is within reach and it somehow buzzes … and I pick it up to glance at it … or I … write a quick message … it is actually difficult to distinguish what is work and what is explicitly leisure time.*

Florian K. describes a scene in which he reads and replies to mails and SMSs while playing with his child, something not unique to him. What concerns him in the narrative, however, is not the idea that repeatedly interrupting play with his son might be a problem but rather his not knowing how to categorize the time he spends in his son's room. His interest is limited to his own self-observation and the perfection of his digital diary entries on how he spends

[8] The case samples of Florian K. and Andrea W. derive from the APAS project by King, Gerisch, Rosa. For more details on the project, see: King (2013), King et al. (2014), Schreiber et al. (2015).

his time. His son's needs are secondary. A similar constellation can be seen in Andrea W.'s narrative:

> *I think that was when Rafi was – older, well, relatively speaking older, I mean, he wasn't, wasn't a baby anymore, but a bit older, a toddler – and then, suddenly, uh, started a little bit to, uh, uh, to demand things: I want to play Duplo with you. I would be like: oh, ok, here is someone who wants you to have time for him right now – and who is not a baby anymore that you can lay down somewhere and (takes a deep breath) say (in a high voice) 'looky here, look at this awesome toy, now lay here under it, see the little bell, super!' (in a normal voice). Now, uh, there is someone who says, 'I want to play Duplo with you now and you just picked me up from daycare and now do something with me – I want to go to the playground with you, uh, Mama, put your cellphone down' … Well, I think I really needed someone, 'cause I actually really like what I do? Eh – someone who really calls it like it is and says, 'Hey, now, take a bit of time off and relax and stop thinking about your job the whole time'.*

Here, too, the needs of the child are secondary. The mother's reflections on the episode are focused on herself. Comparing the four narratives, each depicts parents, fathers or mothers, working in the presence of their children and keeping a steady eye on the more or less irresistible cellphone. The fathers in the first narratives (still) experience shame and guilt for their lack or lapses of attention, escaping to the bathroom with their smartphones. Florian K., however, is most preoccupied with how to categorize the time he spends in his son's room – work or leisure? Andrea does not say, "my child needs me" but "*I* needed someone to say to me, 'Stop working for once' – 'Put your cellphone down'".

Each of these narratives makes clear in its own way how the gaze of parental others for their children can be absorbed elsewhere. Children compete for attention with the (smartphone or computer) screen towards which their parents focus their attention with great interest – and, often, they come up short. In the face of the increasingly common, even normalized practice of withdrawing from immediate communication with those physically present to devote attention to digital activities, the lack of shame visible in the narratives of Florian and Andrea might be understood as an expression of an emerging cultural transformation of values: When the majority behaves similarly it becomes ever more natural – despite the costs and disadvantages – to turn away without shame from others, even a child in need of communication. In this

sense, what can be seen here is a historically new variety of shamelessness. For the development of the psyche, the result may be a deficiency of affection and affirmation that, in turn, affects the child's development of the capacity for shame. As explained in the opening segments of this essay, to an extent, taking up Seidler, to fully develop this capacity, the child must have adequate experience of being seen and affirmed by the significant other, that is, their primary caretaker.

3.2. Multiplied and Fragmented Communication among Adolescents

The boundarylessness of medial consumption affects not only parental practice but that of adolescents themselves as well (Kammerl et al., 2012; King, 2014). The JIM study, focusing on the use of media by children and adolescents in Germany, emphasized as early as 2013 that "a marked transformation … in the length of use-time had taken place" (JIM-Study 2013: 28). The findings were summarized in 2015 as follows, "At 97%, nearly all adolescents use the Internet. Among these, 80% of 12 to 19 year olds are online daily (...) While 12 to 13 year olds spend an average of 156 minutes online, this value increases to 260 minutes by the ages of 18 to 19 years" (JIM-Study 2015: 56). Given these numbers, it is reasonable "to assume that, in addition to the increasing duration of use of the various options in the net (…) the permanent, very much desired, availability allows for the (subjectively experienced) increase in use-time" (JIM-Study 2013: 7). Correspondingly, there are changes in the forms of adolescent communication – even among peers there are similar constellations of disrupted attentiveness or communicative withdrawal as a result of digital practices. As can be seen in an interview with a young man in Grosser's study (2014), when he is out with friends or a friend, "*and then he's on the cellphone the whole time, [it's] really annoying, because he only listens with one ear and just messes around with his phone*" (4). A 22 year old describes a typical scene, when "she is out in the evening with friends, e.g. at a bar, then they all sit down and '*the first thing that happens, they all put their cellphones on the table*' and it has become normal that '*someone writes real quick, although we are all sitting there together*'" (4). "When she is with someone alone '*and he spends the entire time on the phone, I could scream, because that's just something I can't stand*'. She thinks to herself, '*You don't even have to be here talking to me*' and she speaks about it directly. She does it herself, she admits self-reflectively. Yet she finds it '*not very*

pretty or entirely polite'" (5). Michael "uses his smartphone during conversations with others, too … '*but you try to avoid it, but it just happens again and again. It's really already a part of you"* (7).

These descriptions, too, suggest that, though contrasting norms are brought into play, the physical, analog presence, i.e. the gaze of the other in its physical immediacy, is becoming less significant. Physical, "real presence" grows ever more similar to a kind of ornament or background in relation to what is really important, like the temporary and inconsequential presence or insignificant gaze of passengers in the train, who are co-present for a certain period of time, but who remain insignificant and the majority of the time ultimately disappear without trace. This logic of *being absent in the presence of others* penetrates ever deeper into our intimate relationships that require sensual attentive presence. In other words, as ever, adolescents meet up with their peers and spend a good deal of time with other "physically present" adolescents. This does not mean, however, that they engage in actual face-to-face communication. For even when together in the same physical space, their gaze and attention are repeatedly turned to the digital, i.e. messages, information, communication partners or sources of entertainment, which affect the quality of communication, relationships and forms and relevancy of exchange with present and absent others.

It can also be assumed that *the more the shine in the eye of the other is sought in digital social networks* – especially for those who experience the eye of the mother or father (or other significant other) shining brighter when she or he looks at the smartphone than at his or her child's face, or those who must compete with the smartphone or screen of another device for their mother or father's attention – the more likely it is that the search for this "shine" in the mother's eye will be displaced onto the number of *Likes,* the affirmations and attention received in the social network. Granted, one possible response to the childhood experience of competing with the Smartphone for the mother's attention might be to reject the smartphone. However, in a social environment in which digital communication plays such a significant role, this response grows increasingly improbable. The more likely outcome – precisely in the case of insufficient attention from the primary caretakers – is greater conformity and the desire or hope to at least gain control over the gaze of the digital other.

The process of proving oneself in relationships in the classical sense – through an always risky exposure of the self, in which failure is also a possi-

ble outcome – in a form of communication in which individuals experience themselves in speech and response, in direct exchange with one another (i.e. dialogue, gestures and actions) not only loses significance but even appears subjectively obsolete in the end. The experience of the self in the gaze of the other is, thus, one might say, from the start, fragile, erratic, wavering and flickering, like the screen itself. The greater the dependence on the diffuse recognition of the digital *generalized other*, who replaces intimate experience, the more pressing the shame resulting from disregard, from feelings of falling short: Pressing and yet directionless, for ultimately it is only ever about the next round of seeking attention and affection or acclamation, from whomever it may be.

4. The Self in Digital Worlds – Entrepreneurial

> *Like – Test*
> *... you get notified on your phone or through Facebook – Because of – eh – messages – um – you know how many Likes you get – a message for a Like or a Comment – eh – and, of course, you follow that … so … 'cause you just always go to Messages and, well … of course you look at the photo to see how many Likes it has (Tom, 16).*

Bröckling (2016) describes the categorical imperative of our times as a maxim with the invocation "Be entrepreneurial!" Every single person is called upon equally to think in the logic of the "entrepreneurial self" (ibid.), to focus on lifelong profit, customer satisfaction and success, and to act flexibly and be prepared to take risks. This way of life is the result of permanent competition and continually demands further and enhanced, ultimately never-ending efforts at optimization. In this context, optimization generally means the continual orientation towards improvement and extending or crossing boundaries, the creation of relationships (with others and with oneself) within the logic of investment and anticipated returns, and keeping our options open (in case returns might be higher elsewhere) (King et al., 2014). Yet no amount of effort is able to quell the fear of failure: "Because one can assert one's position only for the moment and only in relation to one's competitors, no one can simply rest on their achievements. Today's recipe for success is tomorrow's path to ruin" (Bröckling, 2015: 10).

Self-presentation, then, must always be focused on drawing maximal attention to oneself and showing oneself in the best possible light, and this is all the more true, we might add, in digital contexts: 'Successful' digital self-presentation must be permanently controlled and renewed. In a teaching research project within the scope of a seminar at the University of Hamburg, interviews with adolescents were conducted about what it means to them to post images of themselves on social networks. The results of these explorations underscore the degree to which precisely this logic of optimization and the figure of the entrepreneurial self were implemented in the youths' digital self-presentation practices.

The adolescents maintain, organize and balance their self-presentations with painstaking attention to detail, like an entrepreneur monitoring his profits daily. They look precisely at which images are received by viewers and how, through using particular hashtags and technical possibilities and finesse, they can manage to artificially raise the number of Likes (if you like me, I'll like you) and new 'products', i.e. images of themselves are tested and evaluated constantly. There was also a continual process of optimization in their self-presentation, designed to sustain an audience, i.e. the attention and gaze of others, to increase their numbers and win their loyalty.

> *Interviewer: What do you think would happen if you were to suddenly stop posting photos?*
> *Bianca: Well, if I suddenly don't post, eh, any more photos at all, the first thing that would happen is I would lose all of my followers (laughs)*
> *I: Oh no (laughs)*
> *B: No – that's bad – I'd lose all of my followers right off the bat.*
> *…*
> *I: And having followers is extremely important, right, that you have lots of them?*
> *B: Yes*
> *I: Why?*
> *B: I don't know, I mean, I don't really know. …most followers aren't even people I know. They aren't even friends of mine. Yeah, I like, actually I only think the followers are important so, well, so they just see what kind of photos I have and so and I don't know.*

I: But you would probably be sad if, let's say, half of your followers would cancel their subscription suddenly, right?
B: I would be really sad! …yeah, that would be really stupid, eh, all that hard work. I say hard work, but –
I: Yeah
B: - It's really hard work to get that many followers.

These responses illustrate the extent to which the efforts of the "entrepreneurial self" to optimize must be permanently sustained in a very concrete and practical sense. While this entrepreneurial logic is by no means limited to the digital sphere, it is strikingly clear how much this work in the digital network epitomizes the entrepreneurial *ductus*, the imperative of constant improvement and performance – and how, precisely by this means, adolescents are trained and socialized, almost to perfection, in the relevant forms of entrepreneurial behaviour.

At the same time – the focus is on adolescents, here – their fragility is palpable, the neediness, even the self-doubt, which can hardly be hidden in this presentation market place, for example, with the question, "What would happen if the other saw the real me?"

Some of the interviewed teens state that they regulate their feelings of self-worth through posting images of themselves: When I'm not doing well, I post a nice photo on Facebook and if it gets a good response and lots of people like it, it makes me feel better – of course, the opposite is also true if something goes wrong. Here are some excerpts from the interviews with the young men and women:

Anna responds to the interviewer's question, "What do you think most people, in general, or when you think of friends, want to achieve by posting images in social networks?"

Anna (18): Well, that other people have some kind of idea who they are. And somehow you make an impression on them or something. And I think lots of people…when they post a photo, most likely want to show how good they look – I mean, no one actually posts a photo they look terrible in. I think that would be cool, but no one does that. I think they more want to achieve, that they want to create an image of themselves, what the others then think …

Jule (18): Lots of people pretend to be something maybe to feel better about themselves or edit [the photos] a lot. I mean, I know a few people who really do a lot of that …

Tom (16): Every day a new photo – just to get those Likes…

At the same time, there is shame about the dependence of self-worth on these practices, wherein – in the majority of cases – it is clear we are dealing with the creation of appearances, a construction.

Tony: And that's just somehow, in some way, totally stupid and I think, too, that there is too much of that… I mean…I just don't think it's good that…well, on Facebook everything is just so extremely faked and extremely … embellished, and that… I just don't like it.

Insecurity creates a new need, or rather neediness continually reproduces itself. The unambiguous experience of successfully proving oneself before the other, before the gaze of the other, is lost in the digital vagueness, virtuality and uncertainty of the relationship between self and other. The functions of failure and success lose their foundation, as it were. Failure is not failure; it was only the wrong image of my self, perhaps. Confirmation is not confirmation; it is not recognition, since it was only an image and not my real face, as we see in the thoughts of the young woman whose words form the title of this essay, "If you show your real face, you'll lose 10 000 followers".

5. Conclusions – Shame in Digitalized Relationships

This essay has examined the psychosocial and psychic ramifications of new digital boundaries and constellations of shame, humiliation and shamelessness, as they develop out of the disjunction of physical, communicative presence in the wake of digitalized forms of communication. In particular, it has examined the associated changes in functions and affective pitfalls of self-presentation. Selected descriptions and statements from adolescents of the meaning of social networks and their digital self-presentation illustrated mechanisms that are operative in their practices with the gaze of the other on the net. Psychoanalytic concepts regarding the construction of subjectivity and the significance of shame in the development of the psyche pointed to changes in developmental processes in digitalized worlds.

In summary, the following conclusions can be drawn: Transformed constellations intensify shame and fear of humiliation through social exclusion and inadequacy (in the sense of loss of status or marginalization). Changed forms of communication and the associated forms of relationships can increase the pressure to conform and intensify the fear of marginalization. Those who do not succeed at drawing the attention of others are always the ones who are ashamed – at the same time, the competition for attention in the digital world necessarily grows ever greater.

The analysis further identified the dynamic of an often proclaimed, but actually rather minimized, shame with regard to the virtual negation of the significance of the physically present other, the gaze of the other, in the immediacy of shared physical space (as the basis of self-reassurance). Put another way, it is growing ever more acceptable, as it were, to 'shamelessly' turn away or withdraw from communication with – or to never even turn towards – the physically present other.

Though often indirectly thematized by pointing to behavior of others, new variants of shame for one's own dependence on attention from the digital, physically absent other emerge, reflecting the urgent and simultaneously disappointed hope to establish connections on the net in order to find confirmation and feel a sense of belonging there.

Lastly, the essay turned its focus to the phenomenon of shame for the inadequacies of the virtual self – a variant of shame arising in awareness of the fact that neither the gaze of the other nor the digitally presented self has withstood a direct process of proving themselves. The gaze of the other in digital communication is fleeting and wavering, while the self present on the net is a constructed, in the best case, playful version of the self, but often enough a very seriously considered construct with an eye to the significance of one's own position and status in social groups, instrumentalized to regulate one's feelings of self-worth. As such, it bears great potential for humiliation should the number of Likes be too low, lower than for other people.

In keeping with Seidler's differentiation among various structural levels of shame, this would concern a psychic constellation in which the self remains concretistically dependent on affection and affirmation in order to avoid feeling ashamed. Because these 'concrete' attentions are, at the same time, volatile, the fear of shame remains and continually grows.

Loss of status and shame related to exclusion, thus, takes on greater significance the more the gaze of the digital other assumes responsibility for functions or has this responsibility projected onto it (recognition, affirmation, the desire for a sense of belonging) – functions no longer fulfilled by the digitally-absorbed though physically present other, in particular, the primary care provider in the process of growing up.

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ORIGINAL SCIENTIFIC PAPER

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Media Traumatization, Symbolic Wounds and Digital Culture

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Abstract: *Do media images really traumatize the public? If they do not, then why do so many commentators – from those commemorating the Holocaust to those analysing the impact of 9/11 – claim that trauma can be transmitted to specific ethnic groups or entire societies? While these claims can be based on empirical data or used to justify political agendas, psychoanalysis also continues to influence conceptions of collective trauma and to offer important perspectives for evaluating these conceptions. This paper explores these questions of mediated trauma and collective identity by tracing a neglected historical trajectory back to the work of psychoanalyst and anthropologist Geza Roheim. Roheim produced studies of Australian Aboriginal culture that applied the theory of collective trauma outlined in Freud's Totem and Taboo. He also produced an ethnographic film, Subincision, documenting an initiation rite, that was subsequently used in psychological studies of so-called "stress films". Putting aside Roheim's psychoanalytic interpretations of indigenous culture, psychologists used his film to measure the impact of images of violence and pain. These studies from the 1960s have recently been rediscovered by scholars of Holocaust film and video testimony. This paper seeks to recover the concept of "symbolic wounds" developed in psychoanalyst Bruno Bettelheim's later commentary on Roheim's work. The mass media of newspapers, film and television have supported the idea of cultural trauma shared by large societies. The concept of symbolic wounds that enhance group membership and mobilize collective action may be more useful for understanding how violent and shocking images are put to more diverse uses in digital culture.*

Keywords: *trauma, stress film, symbolic wounds, September 11, ISIS, Black Lives Matter*

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1. Introduction

Research on media traumatization has attempted to explain the psychological impact of images showing violent and catastrophic events (Holmes & Bourne, 2008). Images that *show* pain and suffering can be understood to *cause* pain and suffering for viewers, even if the experience shown and the experience of seeing are understood as qualitatively different. Psychoanalysis has made an important contribution to this area of research by explaining how identification with "traumatic" images is driven by unconscious fears and desires, and how the psyche protects or "numbs" itself against the impact of shock (Freud, 1920; Lifton, 1967). Psychoanalytic accounts that emphasize the role of interior processes of identification, however, have tended to be discounted in research that focuses on the traumatic impact of media images as external stimuli. In order to address this neglected perspective the following discussion seeks to recover a conception of "symbolic wounds" from the works of psychoanalysts Geza Roheim and Bruno Bettelheim (Roheim, 1950; Bettelheim, 1955). Roheim and Bettelheim both argued, in different ways, that violence can have symbolic value that enables social participation and group membership. The following discussion proposes that media images can function as symbolic wounds inviting active identification. I propose that discourses about media traumatization have been dominated by the idea of cultural trauma, which depends on a one-source-to-many-viewers model of mass media. The idea of symbolic wounds better describes the situation made possible by digital media, where new communities emerge in relation to images of violence and suffering, revealing how such images can not only distress or desensitize but also enhance and empower those who look at them.

Claims that media images can induce or transmit traumatic experience have been made about photographs, documentary films, television news and video testimony (Sontag, 1977; Felman & Laub, 1992; Hirsch, 2004; Neria, Di Grande & Adams, 2011). These claims have been associated with the mass media of print, cinema and television because they assume that a single source of information is being received by potentially very large audiences. When entire societies are likely to encounter particular images of violence and catastrophe then public figures, intellectuals and media professionals engage in the discursive construction of cultural traumas (Alexander, 2012): when everyone sees the same images they can be said to experience similar emotional responses.

Probably the most widely known example of this construction of a cultural trauma is the narrative about Americans' shocked response to witnessing the events of September 11, 2001. The possibility that there has never actually been such uniformity of feeling becomes more evident with the greater multiplicity of images and narratives available on the Internet, showing that violent images invite a range of responses that include not only dismay and rage but also "inappropriate" ones such as fascination and amusement. The shift to digital technologies has allowed media users to navigate almost limitless amounts of information, develop individual user profiles and participate in social networks. The proliferation of media images and texts potentially available at any time or place, along with the intensification of explicit violence and horror, make this less predictable encounter with the "traumatic" image a significant feature of media use today (Meek, 2010; Morpurgo, 2016).

Psychoanalysis can help us to understand how the social and cultural value of symbolic wounds has changed in response to historical developments in modern media. Freud understood identity formation in terms of the child's relation to his/her parents in the private domestic space: the child internalized parental authority in the form of the super-ego, which was understood by Freud as specifically patriarchal and middle-class. In Freud's time parental authority over the child's auto-erotic tendencies was commonly expressed through threats of castration (Poster, 2006: 165–168), a symbolic wound that structured cultural identity through sexual repression. Mark Poster argues that because childhood development today is strongly shaped by media technologies, the private relationship between a child and his/her parents has been displaced by the child as a consumer and member of specific target markets. Young people now use a diverse range of media, over which parents exercise limited control (Poster, 2006: 171–173). This situation developed gradually in the second half of the twentieth century, when private life was increasingly characterized by the consumption of newspapers, magazines, television and movies. During this period mass media assumed the role of constructing narratives about national identity and collective traumas. The televisual nature of these traumas can be seen in examples such as the 1961 Eichmann trial, the assassination of John F. Kennedy and the 9/11 attacks. New traumatic images of war, famine and death became available but remained centrally controlled and censored by corporate media. In psychoanalytic terms these traumatic images could be understood as induc-

ing castration anxiety and thereby prompting identification with a national or ethnic superego.

In the mid-1990s trauma studies suggested new approaches to the question of media traumatization by bringing together psychoanalysis, psychotherapy with Holocaust survivors, and recorded testimony in film and video. The influential work of Cathy Caruth and Shoshana Felman sought to recover forgotten historical experience through the transmission of traumatic shock in literary, film and video texts (Felman & Laub, 1992; Caruth, 1996). Psychoanalysis explains traumatic experiences as overwhelming conscious understanding, allowing the unconscious memory of the event to return in symptoms such as nightmares, compulsive behaviours, and other neuroses and pathologies. By analogy, these trauma theorists argued that extreme events resist understanding at the time of their occurrence and reappear as symptomatic disruptions in later representations of history. The emphasis on the collective experience of catastrophe, however, implicitly leads us back to the question of media as an apparatus of power. The political implications of identification with traumatic histories became clearer after the "live" transmission of the 9/11 attacks on television, when many media commentators almost immediately made claims about collective trauma for Americans (Trimarco & Depret, 2005: 30). The "superego" effect of the state and mass media was revealed in subsequent military interventions and intensified national security and social surveillance. The televisual replay of numerous different video recordings made by private citizens appeared to act out the experience of the events as an intrusive memory. National surveys conducted after the 9/11 attacks led to claims of substantial levels of stress and PTSD among the general population (Young, 2007: 28). In this case psychological research appeared to directly serve the interests of a narrative of national trauma.

Both these theoretical and empirical accounts of the psychological impact of 'traumatic' images assumed a single-source-to-multiple-viewer model. Attempts to understand the impact of traumatic images tend to assign roles of perpetrator and victim, using actions in real life events to define a relation between media and viewer. Psychoanalysis, however, includes more complicated accounts of relationships between perpetrator and victim, including fantasy and guilt. Nevertheless, as Ruth Leys (2000, 2007) has shown, both trauma theory and psychological studies of traumatic images have tended to reproduce the

model of impact from an external source and to discount the ways in which trauma is also shaped by interior processes of imaginative investment and identification (which may not be limited to a single position or role). One way to address this imbalance is to consider how viewers can make their identification with images of pain and suffering the basis of socially transformative acts.

Cultural trauma narratives attempt to capture mass identification, but digital media are allowing and revealing a greater diversity of identifications with symbolic wounds. For example, according to W. J. T. Mitchell, the 9/11 attacks initiated a 'war of images' that included the torture of detainees in Abu Ghraib prison, the execution of Saddam Hussein, and the decapitation of hostages by radical Islamists. But Mitchell's account of this war of images, which he claims is "designed to shock and traumatize the enemy" (Mitchell, 2011: 2), remains within the logic of perpetrator and victim transferred onto media image and viewer. In Mitchell's analysis, the word "trauma" tends to connote an external force or event impacting on a body or psyche and leaving an injury or wound. Examples of more complex interactions with digital images as symbolic wounds can be seen in political struggles such as the Arab Spring (Wallace, 2016: 80) and Black Lives Matter. Images of violence and death that have been rapidly disseminated through digital networks have provoked communities to engage in political protest and resistance.

Concerns about the psychological effects of media violence need to be understood in the larger context of modern experience. Walter Benjamin's adaptation of Freud's account of trauma in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920) stressed that shock had become the "norm" (Benjamin, 2003: 318) in metropolitan culture. Freud proposed that the perceptual apparatus develops a "protective shield" (Freud, 1920: 27) to insulate it from the potentially damaging effects of intrusive stimuli. Only the experience of fright (a sudden and unexpected disturbance) is able to pierce the stimulus shield and thereby cause trauma. Benjamin made a parallel between the protective shield and the camera, which mediates shock and thereby deflects any deeper psychological impact. Ever since the invention of photography viewers have been adjusting their perceptual apparatus to cope with visual shock, leading to an ever-increasing intensity of media effects to capture viewers' attention. The experience of mediated shock in modern consumer societies has accelerated the destruction of earlier cultural taboos and traditional values: what was shocking yesterday

may be just boring today or next week. Whereas the media-saturated viewer in technologically advanced societies is often assumed to be morally jaded and unresponsive to shock, digital technologies are allowing individuals and groups to transmit and circulate images that can help to re-invigorate community belonging and collective action. Images of police violence against African Americans, for example, may be 'old news' but recent events captured on mobile-phone cameras and posted on the Internet have prompted acts of protest, mourning and retaliatory violence.

2. Subincision

In the following discussion I want to reconsider debates about media traumatization by focusing on a specific film that has been used in research on stress films: *Subincision Rites of the Arunta*, made by psychoanalyst Geza Roheim in 1937 while conducting fieldwork with the Aboriginal tribe in Australia. This film has been repeatedly used in research studies for the purpose of deliberately causing distress to American viewers (Lazarus et al., 1962; Horowitz, 1969). None of these studies has considered the cultural significance of the ritual shown in the film, which Roheim interpreted using Freud's theory of the primal horde: the violence acted out the collective guilt for the murder of the primal father by the younger males (Freud, 1913). In the 1950s, psychoanalyst Bruno Bettelheim discussed the cultural practice of subincision in terms of "symbolic wounds" allowing for self-transformations that enhanced social status and group membership. What such psychoanalytic theories stressed, which was discounted in later laboratory-based research on media traumatization, was the ways in which violence could enable individual self-transformation and group participation.

Digital culture has provided new evidence to suggest that symbolic wounds can be seen as functioning in new technologically-mediated forms. Those who required audiences to watch *Subincision* expected them to be disturbed by what they saw. Today, however, a quick google videos search of 'subincision' reveals a sub-genre of pornography in which genital mutilation is presented to induce sexual excitement and pleasure, even if for others it may be the object of horror or disgust. Viewers may now use the Internet to access the decapitation videos produced by ISIS, for example, and engage in a range of possible identifications with this violent scenario. These videos are designed, as indeed were the 9/11

attacks, not only to shock but also to recruit. The Internet allows us to see this range of different negotiations articulated in videos and commentaries posted by non-professional users. For example, counter to the televisual narrative depicting America as the innocent victim of a terrorist attack, the Internet has helped to foster new political communities, such as the 9/11 Truth Movement, that challenge the dominant account.

Jeffrey Alexander has described cultural traumas as "wounds to social identity" (Alexander, 2012: 2). In *Subincision* the wounds inflicted by genital mutilation define group membership. Psychological studies showed that the viewing of *Subincision* also produced effects that suggested a shared experience of stress in an entirely different cultural context. Today individuals interact with communication technologies and information networks that allow more private negotiations of thresholds of shock and potential psychological disturbance. The wounds that serve as a basis of identity in tribal communities suggest that violence may continue to define social belonging in more 'advanced' societies, if only in the increasingly dislocated and disembodied forms made possible by technological media. In traditional societies ritual defines social membership; in modern mass societies, mass media construct narratives about collective memory and identity; in networked societies, images can prompt the formation of less centrally-controlled political communities. In each case symbolic wounds play a role in mobilizing and managing group membership. Symbolic wounds now perform an important function in alternative, subcultural and counter-hegemonic narratives about identity in digital culture.

In the study that he led at the University of California observing the psychological stress caused by watching a film, Richard Lazarus selected *Subincision*. Lazarus describes the contents of the film:

> "It depicts one of the important ceremonials of this tribe and very vividly presents a sequence of crude operations performed with a piece of flint on the penis and scrotum of several adolescent boys. The running length is 17 minutes and the film is silent." (Lazarus et al., 1962: 4)

Evaluating the effects of watching this film, Lazarus and his team used personality assessment and measured skin resistance and heart rate and analysed urine samples to assess biochemical response (Lazarus et al., 1962: 4). The screening was followed by a questionnaire-interview asking the subjects to describe their responses to the film and recall what they saw. The participants

were recruited from psychology courses at the University of California. In their concluding remarks Lazarus et al. suggest that further research might consider "what types of content produce stress in a given amount and pattern and in particular classes of people," given the "nudity of the natives" and "the homosexual implications of their behaviour", and also "what might happen if the same subject watched the film over and over again" (Lazarus et al., 1962: 30). These directions for further research point to questions of cultural meaning and social identity and of technological effects (possibly inducing desensitization) that were excluded from consideration in this initial study.

In his 1969 study, Mardi Horowitz used *Subincision* again because of its previous use in such experiments. He provides a more detailed description of the film's content:

> "The film setting is the Australian bush, and it depicts naked natives engaged in a harsh puberty rite. Scenes of extensive penile surgery, bleeding wounds, and adolescents writhing and wincing with pain are repeated several times. The boys appear to volunteer for this painful procedure, which is conducted by older men." (Horowitz, 1969: 554)

Both Lazarus and Horowitz mention the explicit visibility of the boys' genitals – something that was taboo in television and Hollywood cinema in the early 1960s (and indeed remains largely so today).

Fifty years later (perhaps due to the cultural impact of the 9/11 attacks) this research was reconsidered in the new context of trauma theory. For example, in his study of Holocaust films, Joshua Hirsch refers to the research by Lazarus and Horowitz that uses *Subincision* as evidence that "film viewing can lead to symptoms of posttraumatic stress" (Hirsch, 2004: 17). Hirsch combines this proposition with the psychotherapeutic concept of "vicarious trauma" transmitted from a traumatized person to a witness, loved one or family member. Whereas he acknowledges that watching a film can be more emotionally removed than a direct experience of trauma or contact with one who has had such an experience, he nevertheless proposes that the effects of film viewing might include "shock, intrusive imagery, grief, depression, numbing, guilt feelings, and loss of faith in humanity" (Hirsch, 2004: 17). Hirsch's own example of film causing vicarious trauma is the footage taken during the liberation of the Nazi death camps. Hirsch uses earlier research, in which visually taboo material was used to disturb an American audience, to explain how these images of

emaciated, naked corpses and mass death were traumatic. Psychological studies in which the cultural context was discounted are used by Hirsch to make much larger claims about the cultural trauma of the Holocaust. These broader claims, however, remain within the perpetrator-victim/media-viewer analogy.

Ruth Leys also refers to Horowitz's research in the context of discussing the Holocaust. According to Leys, Horowitz distinguished between different types of images, including "memory fragments, reconstructions, reinterpretations, and symbols" (Leys, 2007: 106). Traumatic images, therefore, need not be understood as the literal trace of an event but can involve role-playing, imagination and fantasy shaped by "unconscious wishes, fears, and memories" (Leys, 2007: 108). Leys argues that the studies by Lazarus and Horowitz that used *Subincision* also tended towards a literal conception of the image and emphasized the impact of external stimuli, thereby excluding from consideration more complex models of identification (Leys, 2007: 11–112). This argument could also be applied to Hirsch's claims, which do not adequately address how viewers see the Holocaust as part of their cultural identity. These arguments by Hirsch and Leys draw out some of the wider implications of the research on stress films and how it raises questions about historical context and unconscious motivation.

In his discussion of the studies by Lazarus and Horowitz and the later commentary by Leys, Amit Pinchevski emphasizes the central role of media technologies, which tends to be downplayed in all of this research. Pinchevski argues that the understanding of traumatic memories as intrusive images "must owe something to the film apparatus" and "presupposes the technical ability both to record stressful events and to replay these events so as to reproduce stressful effects" (Pinchevski, 2015: 10). Pinchevski then moves from this proposition to pose the question: "Is it possible to be traumatized by watching a catastrophic event on television?" (2015: 10). Pinchevski's emphasis on the role of media is important, but he tends to return to the problem of external stimuli rather than internal identification. Both the psychological research of the 1960s and more recent research in trauma studies has repeatedly returned to *Subincision*. The following section considers how this film might also prompt us to reconsider the notion of symbolic wounds as a way of understanding media traumatization in digital culture.

3. Roheim, Bettelheim and the Symbolic Wound

The psychological studies of the effects of *Subincision* did not consider cultural factors as a defining influence on viewers' response. Nor did they acknowledge that the man who produced the film, Geza Roheim, was a close associate of Freud and that his study of initiation rituals in a tribal society was framed by Freudian theories of group identity. Roheim did his clinical training at the Budapest Institute of Psychoanalysis. His conception of "psychoanalytic anthropology" initially involved interpretations of folklore and mythologies, but his ethnographic fieldwork in the South Pacific between 1929 and 1931 led to specific studies of totemism in Australian Aboriginal culture. Roheim was heavily influenced by Freud's theory that the totem animal used in sacrificial ritual was a substitute for the primal father who had been murdered by the young males in the tribe, who were envious of his sexual power over women (Le Barre, 1966: 272–281; Robinson, 1969: 74–146). The sense of shared guilt for this crime led to the establishment of the incest taboo (Freud, 1913). Without attempting to resuscitate Freud's theories of the primal horde, we must nevertheless acknowledge that the repeated use of this film opens up a range of questions about cultural identity, cross-cultural understanding and social belonging that have often been excluded from research on the media transmission of trauma. Mediated trauma is intrinsically bound to these questions.

Roheim's psychoanalytic interpretations of myth and ritual were completely out of favour in the academic environment that later used his film of the subincision rite to induce stress in viewers. An important difference between Roheim's interpretation and the psychological research that uses his film was that he sought to understand Aboriginal ritual (if only from a Eurocentric, evolutionist perspective) whereas for these researchers in the 1960s both the cultural context and symbolic meaning were discounted in the research findings. The historical context for research on stress films would have to include the mass media of television and newspapers that, especially after the revelations of the Nazi death camps in 1945, made available more shocking and disturbing images that pre-war censorship did not allow. This media exposure to violence and catastrophe would further intensify as the 1960s progressed. This was also the era of Cold War ideology and propaganda, with its campaigns of fear about the bomb and mass destruction.

In his study of initiation rituals, *Symbolic Wounds*, Bruno Bettelheim discusses the use of subincision by the Arunta with specific reference to Roheim's research. He argues against Roheim's interpretation of the ritual as sadistically imposed by the male elders (as embodiments of the tribal superego) and argues instead that symbolic wounds also enhance cultural identity and empower the participant (Bettelheim, 1955: 124–125, 173–180). To support his argument Bettelheim cites an example from 1950s America:

> "The contention that these physical traumata may be felt as painful but not as cruel, and hence not as traumata in the psychological sense, seems supported by the experience of persons undergoing cosmetic plastic surgery. Nobody I know has regarded such surgery as "cruel"; even the pain seems reduced by the desire with which the operations are approached." (Bettelheim, 1955: 83)

Following the logic of Bettelheim's argument one could also argue that the emphasis on the subincision ritual being distressing for Americans to *watch* fails to acknowledge the positive, enhancing value that the physical transformation has for its *participants*. As Bettelheim explained, initiation is not only endured and demanded by social hierarchies but is also invested with desire (1955: 93).

Bettelheim suggested an important perspective on the subincision ritual that has been ignored in the subsequent research that uses Roheim's film. If the violence and pain shown in the film could be used to induce discomfort for viewers, then the affirmative value of the ritual for the participants in the film could also potentially be transferred onto the viewing experience. The viewer might endure the stress provoked by a film or media image as a means of self-transformation and group participation. This possibility is implied but not directly acknowledged in Hirsch's discussion of Holocaust films: such visual documents can be used not only to transmit trauma but also in new contexts to affirm Jewish identity through collective acts of grieving (Hirsch, 2004: 17) (or to support more sinister identifications with the perpetrators). As viewers negotiate shocking images on the Internet or disseminated through social media, they can choose to engage with the image in ways that are no longer framed by the discourses of academic researchers, media professionals or politicians.

The second half of the twentieth century was characterized by the emergence of narratives about collective identity linked with media images of war, atrocity, genocide and terror. The breakdown of visual taboos and the political

uses of fear and terror have been accompanied by the refashioning of national narratives around extreme events such as the Holocaust and 9/11 (Alexander, 2012). In the twenty-first century digital technologies are reconfiguring this use of images and showing how smaller groups and communities can be empowered rather than positioned as passive victims and docile subjects by corporate media or the state.

4. Digital Wounds: After 9/11

Digital media allow a proliferation of traumatic images that generate a multiplicity of competing discourses and identifications. Newspapers and network television are losing some of their monopoly on cultural trauma narratives. This development is not all good news. For example, although television and cinema have popularized the Holocaust as a cultural trauma, Internet users can more freely engage with 'alternative' narratives, such as Holocaust denial. A substantial archive of video material on YouTube expounds conspiracy theories related to national traumas such as the assassination of J.F.K. or the 9/11 attacks. Universalizing claims about media traumatization are becoming less convincing due to growing evidence online that media images invite a wider range of responses and interpretations.

When specific events, such as the 9/11 attacks, are given the status of 'traumatic' for large populations, they are elevated from 'just another' image of death and suffering to a cause of psychological stress or a cultural and political crisis. The numerous video recordings made by ordinary citizens of the attacks were subsequently 'captured' by network television and orchestrated into a narrative of national trauma. Images of the attacks were re-played obsessively on television in the hours and weeks that followed them. This repetition helped to establish the events as a social wound inviting collective identification. These recordings, nevertheless, continue to have an afterlife on YouTube, revealing a range of responses to the unfolding events that includes not only distress but also conspiracy theorizing and even amusement.

Mitchell describes 9/11 as an attack on the collective nervous system, producing "a state of panic, anxiety, or depression, or even worse, in a psychotic state, generating hallucinations and paranoid fantasies" (2011: 52). Here Mitchell ascribes a collective psychological state to the American people. But it would be more accurate to see what he calls a "war of images" as conforming to

a logic that is a long established feature of technologically mediated societies. The ISIS decapitation videos are a clear example of this logic: they present an image of otherness or barbarism, a kind of absolute threat to Western "civilized" values. Yet in their presentation styles, their use of digital cameras and editing, their production of high definition images and musical soundtracks etc., they participate in a visual language that is also used in advertising, music videos and numerous other audio-visual genres. They do not necessarily pose a traumatic intrusion into the collective nervous system or a penetration of collective psychological defences. Rather they participate in a cultural system of image consumption attracted and repelled by shock and voyeuristic fascination. ISIS decapitation videos use ritual slaughter to make a symbolic challenge to Western hegemony. The 'correct' response to these videos in the West is outrage and disgust. But these executions of hostages are performed in the name of many innocent victims of Western military interventions in the Middle East. The videos act out the traditional sovereign power of God and state and in doing so invite others to dedicate their lives to a political struggle. These images, deemed "traumatic" for Western viewers, can also be understood as symbolic wounds inviting positive identification for those who support physical violence as a challenge to Western interests and interventions in the Middle East.

Images of violence and catastrophe are consumed, self-censored and negotiated as a regular occurrence for the contemporary media user. For most media users psychological defences are relatively secure unless the violence or catastrophe poses some immediate threat to their lives or loved ones. Discourses about the psychological vulnerability of large populations can be seen as part of the apparatus of surveillance (Meek, 2016: 145) but they also invite viewers to self-examine and regulate their consumption of stress-inducing images. In a neoliberal society where individuals are required to manage higher levels of risk and therefore also higher levels of fear and anxiety, the media user learns to monitor his/her own resilience, coping mechanisms and levels of distress. The assumption of research on media traumatization appears to be that it measures psychological damage and social cost. But shock and trauma can also be a 'gain', marking a transition into a new identity and increasing the power of the body and the group to sustain itself despite experiencing physical or psychological distress.

This potential for traumatic images to function as symbolic wounds mobilizing political action became clear in the Arab Spring. In June 2009 Nedā Āghā Soltān was shot during election protests in Iran and her subsequent death, two minutes later, was recorded and posted on the Internet. She became an icon of the political struggle in Iran. In 2010 Khaled Said was beaten to death by police in Egypt. The image of his battered face was recorded on a mobile-phone camera by his brother and circulated to thousands of other phones. A Facebook group "We are all Khaled Said" was also established (Howard & Hussain, 2011: 38). The new digital image-producing technologies and social networks allowed traumatic images to challenge the authority of the Arab states. The violence perpetrated by the state against the people could be transformed by digital media into symbolic wounds mobilizing struggles for democracy. Established media, particularly the Al Jazeera television network, also played important roles in these political movements. But it was mobile cameras that made it possible for ordinary citizens to capture and circulate traumatic images in ways that eluded the control of the state (Khondker, 2011: 678).

Distinctions between victim, perpetrator, witness and bystander remain important for understanding the shifting subject positions of traumatic identification (Kaplan, 2005: 2), but the relations between these different positions can be complex. To support acts of violence and their technological recording and transmission for political purposes requires identification not only with the perpetrators, but also with those *other* victims in whose name the violence is perpetrated. Recording and transmitting images of suffering and death may be done out of sympathy with the victims, but can also be used to justify further acts of violence. Looking at any image of violence and suffering may be driven by mere curiosity or voyeuristic desire. What the term "symbolic wound" potentially contributes to our understanding of this shifting dynamic of suffering, perpetrating and witnessing is that wounds have symbolic currency, transmitting cultural meanings about social membership. The meaning of pain is not 'traumatic' in any single sense but is unstable and transformative. To understand mediated trauma we need to move beyond the fundamental distinction between who induces and who suffers pain. Once violence and suffering are recorded and transmitted to viewers the images enter a new symbolic economy that allows for various positions of identification, interpretation and responsive action.

In America digital media have also made more visible the violence perpetrated by the state against African Americans. In 2016, the shooting and killing by police of Alton Sterling in Louisiana and Philando Castile in Minnesota were both recorded on mobile-phone cameras and posted on social media, again leading to widespread protest and further violence. Castile's actual death was streamed "live" on Facebook by his partner Diamond Reynolds. The protests against the killings of African Americans by police have become associated with the increasing public visibility of Black Lives Matter (BLM), a civil rights movement that began on Facebook in 2013. This use of communication technologies made visible to a potentially unlimited viewing public what many had known about for decades. The killing of African Americans by police, whether judged lawful or not, acts out the state's power over life and death. The videos that show this exercise of state power provoke others to challenge the legitimacy of this violence. As a contemporary civil rights movement BLM is distinguished from its forerunners by its dissociation from established organizations like the church and Democratic Party and by its lack of reliance on charismatic leaders such as Martin Luther King or Jesse Jackson. BLM is a decentralized movement that emphasizes localized action but, as in the Arab Spring, it retains links with corporate media. Celebrity singer Beyoncé posted messages about the shootings of Sterling and Castile on her website and "Black Lives Matter" appears as graffiti in her "Formation" music video. The movement has spread to other countries, for example Australia, where it addresses similar issues for Aborigines.

5. Conclusions

The dominance of centrally controlled media such as newspapers, cinema and television made possible the wide dissemination of narratives about collective trauma that were linked to specific images such as those of the Nazi death camps or the Vietnam War. The 9/11 attacks saw a transition to a new multiplicity of recordings of the event made by ordinary citizens that were later orchestrated in presentations by television news and documentary. More recent developments such as the Arab Spring, the emergence of Black Lives Matter as an international movement, and the propaganda videos produced by ISIS, show that 'traumatic' images can be captured by groups and used to mobilize political struggles that challenge hegemonic power.

Psychological research on media traumatization involved deliberately inducing stress by showing violent and taboo images to unprepared audiences. This research was extended to entire populations after the 9/11 attacks. Psychoanalytic perspectives on the transmission of trauma using photographs and audio-visual media suggest a more complex understanding of cultural identification. Academic developments informed by psychoanalysis in trauma and Holocaust studies, however, have often tended to reproduce the model of trauma as external stimuli impacting on viewers. Developments in digital culture allow us to see a more proactive production and mobilizing of traumatic images by a more diverse range of individuals and groups. The idea of 'symbolic wounds' as a means of self-transformation and group participation may offer a useful corrective to the dominant idea of cultural trauma.

Individual media users and social networks share potentially shocking or disturbing images as a means of constructing social identity. What research in the 1960s called stressful can now be seen as enhancing knowledge, social participation and pleasure. Modern visual media has played a significant role in redefining political identity through images of violence and catastrophe. Digital media technologies are enabling new modes of social and political participation in which 'traumatic' images define what constitutes a threat, what is permissible to look at, what can be endured and what can mobilize collective identification and political struggle.

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ORIGINAL SCIENTIFIC PAPER

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The Other Self in Free Fall: Anxiety and Automated Tracking Applications

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Abstract: *Recent scholarship on the rise of automated self-tracking has focused on how technologies such as the Fitbit and applications such as Nike+ demand that the user internalize the logic of contemporary surveillance. These studies emphasize the disciplinary structure of self-tracking – noting that these applications rely on logics of self-control, flexibility and quantification to produce particular neoliberal subjects. Following these readings, this paper considers the central role that anxiety plays in motivating, and maintaining, the subject's desire to understand the self through automated tracking systems. I will elaborate on this anxiety in three defined sections. Firstly, I will provide a brief overview of the relationship between anxiety and affect developed in both Freud's and Lacan's work on anxiety. Secondly, I will consider how the particular aesthetic principles of two applications, the Nike+ running application and the Spire breath monitoring application, afford the production of anxious digital selves by drawing on the emerging digital aesthetic of the free-fall in order to create a simultaneous distanciation and conflation of the embodied self and the digital self. Finally, I will consider how self-tracking applications represent a particular affective loop, fuelled by the subject's insatiable jouissance, which drives a never-ending anxious attempt to reunite the subject and object. Ultimately, it is from within these practices of digital self-construction that we can most clearly identify both an everyday anxiety of the self and emergent subjectivity and aesthetic of the present.*

Keywords*: anxiety, affect theory, automation, self-tracking, quantified self, aesthetics*

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> 'That's not it' is the very cry by which the *jouissance* obtained is distinguished from the *jouissance* expected (Lacan, 1998: 111).

1. Introduction

The beginning of the Quantified Self movement is commonly attributed to the publication of a widely circulated 2010 editorial by Gary Wolf in *The New York Times Magazine*. In this article, "The Data-Driven Life", Wolf sets out the general idea for a new form of living guided by the numeric possibilities of emerging tracking applications. These applications, he explains, allow for an increasing quantification of our personal lives as, "Sleep, exercise, sex, food, mood, location, alertness, productivity, even spiritual well-being are being tracked and measured, shared and displayed" (Wolf, 2010). While Wolf was writing prior to the arrival of many of the most popular tracking applications available today, basic tools such as the FitBit, Nike+ and Garmin Running Trackers, and even rudimentary digital pedometers, would all be clear examples of the many technologies of the quantified self. From within this ever-increasing field of tracking applications and personal data, Wolf argues that the Quantified Self movement offers an opening for self-understanding: it transforms the banal everyday into a matrix of information and infographics, and it presents the subject with the visual means to apprehend the self. This chain – from data collection to visual representation – is what ultimately connects many diverse applications within the category of the Quantified Self. As Whitson explains, "The unifying methodology of QS [the Quantified Self] is data collection, followed by visualization of these data and cross referencing, in order to discover correlations and modify behavior" (Whitson, 2014: 346).

There is then a particular gap that is always-already proposed in the Quantified Self movement wherein the subject necessarily separates, and aestheticizes, an image of the self as an object. This gap is clearly articulated as a type of inscription – a movement where the self is written and reproduced as the object of inquiry. The practice of writing the self is not a particularly new one; rather, as Foucault explained, it can be seen in the journaling practices of first and second century Rome (Foucault, 1997: 207). From within these practices it becomes apparent that inscription functions in both the role of the Other for the

singular subject and as a mode of entry into the depths of the self, as Foucault makes clear how writing reveals "the practice of ascesis as work not just on actions but, more precisely, on thought: the constraint that the presence of others exerts in the domain of conduct, writing will exert in the domain of the inner impulses of the soul" (Foucault, 1997: 208). The space developed through inscription – whether it be created through the self-reflective practice of journaling or through the automated writing of the tracking app – reveals an attempt to distance the self from the self, to transform the subject into an object, and to discipline, and aestheticize, our own selves.

Importantly though, the difference between the journal and the tracking app is a profound one: the application is itself automated and self-producing. Where the journal involves a necessary step back, an ongoing negotiation between the subject and its imagined ideal self that might be best understood as the therapeutic construct of the subject as object, the tracking application does this work of distanciation and evaluation for the subject. In this way, the emergence of the quantified self involves new forms of subject production, new affective regimes of experience and new aesthetics to match our altering sense of ourselves. How, we might ask, does automation rewrite our experiences of therapy? How does affect circulate through automated asocial, and social, networks?[2] How does it blur the lines between the subject and object? Between the self and other? How does the image of the self emerge when this image is tagged, tracked, circulated and reproduced on different screens? If, as Lacan has made clear in his work on the Mirror Stage, we find the image of our ideal self in the ambient experience of the world and the knowing gazes of the Other, how might these mechanisms be transformed by their digital and automated reconstruction?

It is from within these questions that this paper finds its genesis. Put simply, I argue that what is revealed in the attempts to aestheticize the self through tracking applications is a novel anxious subjectivity of the digital era. If, as Lacan has argued in the recent English translation of his seminar on Anxiety, "There is no auto-analysis, even when one imagines there is. The Other is there" (Lacan, 2014: 22), then much of the power of self-tracking lies in its ability to blur the lines between subject and object, to allow the subject a sense of mastery of the self, and to create the illusion of auto-analysis. Inscription, as the mode

2 For a discussion on the relationship between automaticy and affect theory, see Blackwell, 2014

through which this sense of division is created, provides a conduit for the production of anxious objects and, rather than quelling the subject's uncertainty, it is in this perceived mastery of the self that anxiety develops further. In this way, the automated tracking application constructs a type of secondary self, a projected digital self that is both the object of anxiety and the object-cause of desire – one and the same in Lacan's reading of anxiety (Lacan, 2014: 40).

2. Anxiety's Objects, or, Anxiety as Affect

In order to make sense of the particular contemporary moment, to try and tease out the illusory therapeutic logic of the self-tracking application that is couched in this larger history of writing, separating and mastering the self, it is worthwhile returning to another historic construct that blurs the lines between the self and its other, namely, psychoanalysis' intertwined relationship with anxiety and affect. This relationship begins close to where it will end in this paper, with a declarative uncertainty that, as revealed in Sigmund Freud's "The Problem of Anxiety", explains that, "Anxiety, then, is in the first place something felt. We call it an affective state although we are equally ignorant of what an affect is" (Freud, 1936: 69). For Freud then, anxiety is necessarily affective, but the true meaning of this feeling, and of affects in general, remains almost purposefully unclear. Likewise, Lacan's 1962 seminar on anxiety offers little in the way of a taxonomy or rigid definition of affect and instead presents us with only an explanation of what affect is not: "It is not Being given in its immediacy, nor is it the subject in raw form either. It is in no respect protopathic. My occasional remarks on affect amount to nothing but that" (Lacan, 2014: 14). For Lacan, affect is felt but not experienced by the senses, it is necessarily unknown, and it is not tied clearly to the subject proper. This negative definition is paralleled in his reading of contemporaneous research on affect that he catalogues as being based either on analogy or categorization (Lacan, 2014: 19–20). Categorization lumps together varying affects within specific categories whereas analogical research compares the function of affect across different levels of biology, sociality or psychology. Both, he argues, fail to grasp the nature of affect.

Rather than categorizing or comparing, affect is best understood for Lacan as *the function of the key* in which "The key is the thing that unlocks and, in unlocking, functions." (2014: 21). In his habitually paradoxical language here, Lacan's argument is quite simply that affect reinforces itself by being generative;

affect is both a cause and effect, it circulates and regenerates through its circulation. As such, Lacan understands affect as less specific, and more atmospheric, than categorical or analogical research would allow. Affect is something both within and without the subject; it is, he argues, "…unfastened, it drifts about. It can be found displaced, maddened, inverted, or metabolized, but it isn't repressed" (2014: 14). Here Lacan is in agreement with much contemporary work; affect is found in the social, it affects us, it pushes us, it moves bodies and compels motion.[3] Where he veers off course from much of the current thought on affect, and where the anxiety of affect theory (or anxiety in generally) actually emerges is in affect's relationship with language. As he explains, if affect is unfastened and never repressed, "What are repressed are the signifiers that moor it" (2014: 14). Following Lacan's work on the relationship between language and desire, we see here the emergence of a logic that will run through the remainder of his seminar on anxiety: if affects are unfastened, drifting and atmospheric, and the signifiers that we use to describe them are repressed, and if anxiety is an affect, then we cannot understand anxiety in the words we use to describe it. Rather, we must look to anxiety's objects for a sense of direction.

In his own search for anxiety's peculiar object, Freud's final influential theory of anxiety, from *Inhibitions, Symptoms and Anxiety* (1926), makes explicit the connection between anxiety and affect.[4] As an affect, Freud identifies anxiety as a signal and as a response from the ego to danger that produces particular symptoms and inhibitions. Importantly, the danger-situation to which anxiety responds is largely based on early childhood traumas, and for Freud, the helplessness of birth acts as a prototype for anxiety.[5] The helplessness of being born, of being torn away from the mother and thrown into the air, initiates an undying desire for love in the subject. As Freud explains, "The biological factor of helplessness thus brings into being the first situations of danger and creates the need to be loved which the human being is destined never to renounce" (1926:

[3] In "Intensities of Feeling: Towards a Spatial Politics of Affect" Thrift outlines four major schools of affect theory – phenomenological/embodied, psychoanalytic, Spinozian/Deleuzian, and Darwinian – all united by the fact that each of them, "depends on a sense of push in the world." (Thrift, 2004: 64).

[4] Freud offered two distinct theories of anxiety throughout his work. The first, from 1895, largely identifies anxiety with an accumulation of energy generated from failed sexual experience. The second, from 1921, posits that anxiety is a particular signal for the imminent arrival of a dangerous situation.

[5] Freud is both rejecting, and building atop of, Otto Rank's theory that anxiety is based fundamentally on birth. While Freud is sympathetic to this idea, he sees birth not as the initial anxious situation, but rather as prototypical affective state that changes over the life course. See Freud, 1926: 152 for a clear explanation.

99). This desire for love that is initiated alongside a prototype for the anxious moment is ultimately opened up by, not so much the unknown of the world, but the absent. Corporeal, biological and psychic helplessness, all experienced at birth and repeated again and again throughout life, work in tandem with the absent object of desire to meld phobia/desire/anxiety into an inextricable knot. Freud isolates three particular early childhood phobias, "being left alone, being in the dark, and finding a strange person in place of the one in whom the child has confidence (the mother)" (1926: 75), as being key to anxiety, as they replicate this particular feeling of helplessness in tandem with a moment of loss. That is, each of these moments reveals the helplessness that is felt in the loss of the object of desire.[6] Anxiety then is not just without an object, it is located in the very helplessness of this without-ness, in the very possibility of loss itself.

Anxiety in this reading ultimately produces repression – it pushes back as a type of defence to the danger-situation of loss and represses these original traumas. Thus it works as a signal that invites investigation to locate the root cause of its origins. Lacan's reading of anxiety follows Freud's affective base but eschews Freud's desire to unearth, through language, a solution to anxiety. Rather, Lacan looks towards anxiety's particular inexpressible qualities to further understand the equally inexpressible cause of desire. Here Lacan reverses one of Freud's original ideas. Where Freud defines anxiety in opposition to fear, as it has "…a quality of *indefiniteness and lack of object*" (Freud, 1895: 100), Lacan declares that anxiety "…*is not without an object*" (Lacan, 2014: 89). This seemingly simple reversal makes use of a litote, a negation aimed to produce its inverse, to amplify the importance of anxiety's object into something more than a simple object. As Lacan explains:

> "This relation of being *not without having* doesn't mean that one knows which object is involved. When I say, *He's not without resources*, *He's not without cunning*, it means, at least for me, that his resources are obscure, his cunning isn't run of the mill." (2014: 89)

[6] The link between birth, helplessness and desire for the mother is, of course, well established within Freud's psychic universe. The biological role played by the mother in maintaining sustenance is repeated in Freud's psychic economy as a link between anxiety, helplessness and desire that is obviously reminiscent of Irigaray's reading of Heidegger's absent women and air. As Freud writes, "The striking coincidence that both birth anxiety and the anxiety of the infant alike claim separation from the mother as their prerequisite needs no psychological interpretation; it is simply that the mother, who in the beginning had satisfied all the needs of the foetus through her body mechanisms, continues after birth as well to exercise in some measure this same function, although by other means" (Freud, 1926: 77).

To be not without an object reveals the object as something opaque and obscure; the object is there, but unknown and perhaps unknowable. The relationship between anxiety, affect and language is made more clear here as it begins to line up with what Lacan calls the *objet petit a* – the object-cause of desire. Put simply, for Lacan the object of anxiety and the object of desire are one and the same.

Throughout his seminar on anxiety, Lacan makes clear that the *objet petit a* is a type of trace, a remainder, from the subject's encounters between the imaginary and symbolic realms (Lacan, 2014: 62–64). Just as the *objet petit a* is inscribed in the image of the whole self first encountered in the mirror stage – an image that Lacan poignantly reminds us is always confirmed by the Other in the infant's quick sideways glance over its shoulder – its transition to the object of anxiety relies on this central location within the self. It is in this movement that the subject looks to the Other for confirmation that we can see the logic and structure of desire and anxiety where, as Lacan explains, "…with this nutating movement of the head, which turns towards the adult as if to call upon his assent, and then back to the image, he seems to be asking the one supporting him, who here represents the big Other, to ratify the value of this image" (Lacan, 2014: 32). Ratifying the value of this image – seeing the whole self and then looking over at the Other to confirm this wholeness – instigates the cycle of desire and anxiety where the *objet petit a*, this remainder from the imaginary whole self that we can never realize, is displaced and thought to be found in the Other. Desire is transposed onto the Other, when ultimately the *objet petit a* is in fact the subject. In this way, we are our own objects of desire, our own objects of anxiety, but we look towards the Other for satisfaction.[7]

This chain is an endless one. The object of desire is the impossibly whole self, forever lost when the imaginary realm is drawn into the symbolic and attached to the field of the Other. Anxiety enters into this chain as a different object, one that works:

> "By the model of the cut, of the furrow, of the unary train, of the *there it is*, which in operating always remain tight-lipped – the tight lip or lips of the cut – which become a closed book on the subject, unopened letters sending him off again under closed seal to further traces." (Lacan, 2014: 76).

[7] Lacan makes this relationship clear in the final lecture of this seminar, explaining that, "The sole path on which desire can furnish us with that wherein we shall have to recognize our selves as object *a* – in so far as, at the end-point, an end-point that is doubtless never reached, it is our most radical existence – only opens up by situating the *a* as such in the field of the Other" (Lacan, 2014: 337).

It is, in this sense, an object that emerges where there should be none. The uncertainty of the object is understood as a type of furrow of still closed lips; it is, as Renata Salecl has made clear, "not the lack, but rather the absence of lack, i.e. the fact that where there is supposed to be lack, some object is present" (Salecl, 2004: 14). The object is an opening in the liminal points of contact with the Other, where we encounter the furrowed lips of the Other and, expecting to see a lack that mirrors our own, we instead encounter a crack in the realm of the symbolic; we encounter something. Anxiety's object becomes overwhelming in these moments precisely because it is a type of potentiality within the world of language where, "Signifiers turn the world into a network of traces in which the transition from one cycle to another is thenceforth possible" (Lacan, 2014: 76).

It is in this position of transition, as the furrow before the opening, as the cleave in the lips that opens to further language, that anxiety's affective role is made clear. As Lacan further argues, anxiety is a type of presentiment, a before that opens up to a coming experience:

> "Anxiety is this cut – this clean cut without which the presence of the signifier, its functioning, its furrow in the real, is unthinkable – it's the cut that opens up, affording a view of what now you can hear better, the unexpected, the visit, the piece of news, that which is so well expressed in the term *presentiment*, which isn't simply to be heard as the premonition of something, but also as the pre-feeling, the *pre-sentiment*, that which stands prior to the first appearance of a feeling." (2014: 76)

The formula at work here – that anxiety is a type of presentiment, a pre-feeling felt before a feeling is known or describable – is clearly drawn from its status as an affect. As an affect, this sense lines up with much contemporary work where, for example, "…affect is what makes feelings feel. It is what determines the intensity (quantity) of a feeling (quality)…" (Shouse, 2005) and it is here that anxiety's radical relationship to affect should be rethought as, what is revealed in the anxious moment is affect's force as a type of predisposition, and further, affect's force as that which structures our approach to an object.

In particular, to return to Lacan's equation of the object of anxiety with the object of desire, it is necessary to remind ourselves that the *petit object a* is, "…to be conceived of as the cause of desire…the object [that] lies *behind* desire" (2014: 101). As the object of desire and the object of anxiety are one and the same in Lacan's reading, what is revealed here is that both anxiety and desire are affects that emerge from within the space of the subject, and further, that

both anxiety and desire are affects that propel us forward into the world. We are pushed forward in pursuit of our desires and we experience anxiety precisely at the moment where we encounter the objects of this desire.[8] The result is an affective loop, a continuous circle, an unending pursuit of *jouissance* and of *das Ding*.[9] This pursuit is one that necessarily goes unfulfilled, as Adrian Johnstone has made clear:

> "The 'jouissance expected' is an illusory, mythicized 'full satisfaction,' namely, the re-finding of das Ding, the decisive final quelling of the incessant clamoring of the drives. However, what the subject always gets (i.e. the 'jouissance obtained') is, at best, a pleasure that falls short of the idealized standard." (Johnston, 2002)

In place of fulfillment, the pursuit of *jouissance* will always fail to satisfy us. As we approach the *petit objet a*, as we are propelled forward to what we imagine as our ideal selves revealed through the other, we are struck by anxiety. What, we might wonder, would it mean to encounter ourselves? What would it mean to finish the project of the self? In this possibility of lack fulfilled, in the possibility of a lack of lack, we encounter anxiety's object. Like *das ding* itself, the centrality of anxiety's object is also its very exclusion.[10] In this way, anxiety is best understood as an affect, as that which guides and directs our approach to our selves and our objects of desire. Just as the satisfaction of jouissance is endlessly deferred for another object, anxiety endlessly defers its own object. Anxiety functions as both an opening and impediment then – it emerges alongside desire to move the subject forward, but it equally emerges as this desire is necessarily impeded and unfulfilled. As we approach ourselves in writing and in language, as we begin to track ourselves and automate our writing, we consistently fail to grasp that whole self and are left anxious and incomplete.

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[8] A brief note to thank the anonymous reviewer who made this important distinction clear. In as much as the object of desire and the object of anxiety are equated in Lacan's seminar on Anxiety, it is necessary to make explicit the role of jouissance in this relationship as it helps to understand the habitual drive of anxiety and, for my own work, it helps to understand the ongoing repetitions of digital technologies.

[9] Lacan introduces his reading of *das Ding* as a particularly affective object in *Seminar VII: The Ethics of Psychoanalysis* where he notes that this object is one that functions beyond the signified and is, "characterized by primary affect prior to any repression" (Lacan, 1992: 54). That is, like anxiety's affective relationship, *das Ding* is necessarily outside of, or before, language. It is an affect prior to significations repression.

[10] This paradoxical situation is made clear by Lacan when he notes of his own diagrams of *das Ding*, "Simply by writing it on the board and putting *das Ding* at the center, with the subjective world of the unconscious organized in a series of signifying relations around it, you can see the difficulty of topographical representation. The reason is that *das Ding* is at the center only in the sense that it is excluded" (Lacan, 1992: 71).

3. In Free Fall: Self-Tracking and Anxious Aesthetics

3.1. Case 1: The Nike+ Running App

Opening up the Nike+ Running App reveals a specific sociality to self-tracking, an Other that is always projected onto the screen alongside the self. The launch screen is a top-down image of a pack of runners moving forward (See Image 1), the home screen gives a cumulative total of your statistics (number of runs, total miles run, Nike fuel consumed) and a list of the recent totals of any other contacts who use the app (See Image 2), and the menu screen fol-

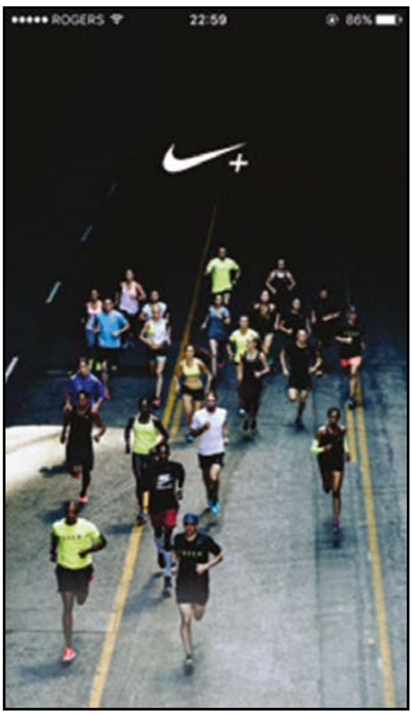


Image 1: Opening Screen of Nike+

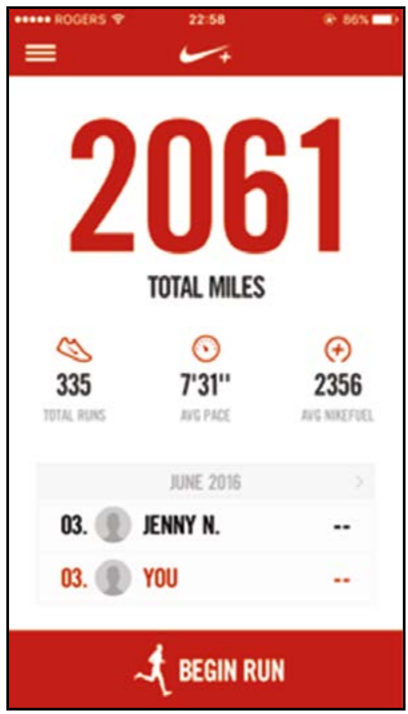


Image 2: Comparison with Other Users

lowing any run offers a number of ways to share your statistics on social media.[11] This sociality is both central to, and masked by, the app's tracking functions: by using both the GPS monitors and the accelerometers and gyroscopes built into contemporary smart phones, the app is able to keep a constant record of your movement; it is able to constantly and automatically write your self and to track that self against an Other.

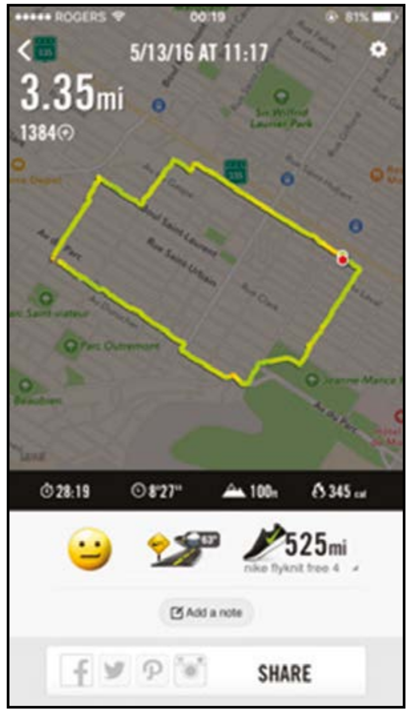


Image 3: Map of Recent Run

From within the application, a couple of small taps will draw on this self-writing to give further visual details regarding the specifics of each run. Going over my own recent history, I click on a run from May 13th, 2016 and I get to see a map of my route, a reminder of the too-many-miles run in the same old pair of shoes, and a smiley – in this case not quite smiling or frowning – that announces how I felt that day. (See Image 3). Like the launch screen that opens the app with an image of a pack of runners taken from above, in these visual representations of physical activity the experience is transformed from something corporeal to something top-down and cartographic: the feeling of the street is replaced by the knowledge of the map. In this way, the Nike+ Running app splits the user into two parts: subject and object, user and data, self and other.

In so doing, the app draws on an emergent aesthetic of urbanism and digital space. This aesthetic is not the one defined by De Certeau's (1984) traditional binary of the street and the bird's eye view, but rather it pulls on the surveillance view from nowhere and everywhere, from satellite images and Google maps, and from the amorphous network of images consumed everyday on

[11] Within the larger logic of cross-platform synergy, Nike has developed a proprietary energy measuring unit - Nike-Fuel - to replace calories across its many different applications. Nike fuel works then as a "universal way to measure all kinds of activity - from your morning workout to your big night out" ("What is Nike Fuel?", 2016) that functions and syncs across multiple applications.

smart phones and tablet screens.[12] This new view and emerging aesthetic is most clearly defined in Hito Steyerl's article "In Free Fall: A Thought Experiment on Vertical Perspective" wherein she follows the rise of new satellite and tracking imagery against the withering horizon of linear perspective to note that, "for many people today the simulated grounds of aerial imagery provide an illusionary tool of orientation in a condition in which horizons have, in fact, been shattered" (Steyerl, 2011). A sense of control and stability is given over to the user in these cartographic moments as they come to mask the fact that, "Time is out of joint and we no longer know whether we are objects or subjects as we spiral down in an imperceptive free fall" (Steyerl, 2011). This logic is clear in the moment when any given run is open on the Nike+ app. The cartographic image begins with a quick animation, a slow rotation and zoom in on the space of the map that mirrors the more familiar animation used by Google maps when a user shifts from street view back to a top down map.

In this way, Nike+ capitalizes on both the free-fall of our contemporary moment and the sense of control given over to surveillant and top-down imaging. On the one hand, the app invites the user to move away from the embodied sensation of running by replicating the slide from the street to the satellite, a slide that has become a familiar sensation in the contemporary moment and thus draws on its users' knowledge and comfort with their own digital selves. On the other hand, the application always necessarily conflates the subject-on-the-screen with the subject-in-the-flesh through a combination of what Alexander Galloway has referred to as the diegetic and non-diegetic aspects of video game action where the diegetic action advances the first-person narrative of the game and the non-diegetic, off the screen action, of the user establishes the conditions of game play (Galloway, 2006: 6–8). Together then, it is in the embodied action of the runner that the narrative of Nike+ unfolds as each physical step taken and mile run allows the application to accumulate numeric values and, simultaneously, with each topographic representation of a previous step the application posits both a stable ground and a stable self over which the user has both distance and mastery.

Thus, the Nike+ application blurs the line between the user and their image, between the self and its object, through a repeated conflation of the physicality of the subject and object alongside a repeated distanciation of these two forms. This repetition of conflation and distanciation of subject and object, of self and

[12] For De Certeau's different views of the city, see De Certeau, 1984: 93–95.

self-image, is itself mirrored in the affectivity of anxiety in psychoanalysis. Where Freud sees anxiety's affective power located in the potential loss of an object, in the space of without-ness, we can see this anxiety within the separation of the self and its screen-based object. And where Lacan sees anxiety in the very presence of the anxious object, in the space filled by the Other where there should be none, we can see the anxiety produced through the repeated conflation of our digital-self with our embodied self. That is, in the very moment where the application proposes the equivalency of the data produced on the screen and the embodied self, we encounter ourselves on the screen and we encounter the Other, in the form of automated writing that confirms our digital selves, in the data we have produced. The screen becomes a liminal space in this reading - it is the place of contact between two parallel selves and, in the vocabulary of the Mirror Stage, it is both the mirror and the glance over the shoulder. Anxiety emerges precisely in this moment where we expect to find a gap, a lack that is common to the self and the Other, but instead we encounter a confirmation of the relationship between the diegetic and the non-diegetic; we encounter an object, a complete self confirmed in data, where there should be none.

3.2. Case 2: The Spire Breath

Equally though, we see this anxiety producing distanciation and conflation of the self repeated in the aesthetic constructions of a multitude of other self-tracking applications. The Spire breath tracking application provides perhaps the clearest example of this automated anxiety as it uses a separate monitor to track the non-diegetic breaths of the subject-in-the-flesh for any symptoms of emotional discord in order to advance the diegetic imagery of the subject-on-the-screen. Spire, an application that aims to help its users breathe better in order to "unlock the ability to control our emotions, fears, and keep a clear mind" ("Spire", 2016) works by having the user wear a small monitor that keeps real time statistics of their breathing rates and a log of all of their previous breathing habits (See Image 4). Under Spire's guise, even habitual breathing can become a habit to work on and, when a user begins to speed up their breathing, the application alerts them to their developing corporeal stress and invites a conscious intervention.[13] In this way, Spire functions as a type of *pre-sentiment*; as a warning symbol of upcoming anxiety.

[13] Habit plays an important role here as the repetition sought by the user of self-tracking applications is, of course, essential to the collection of data for the producers of these applications. For more on the relationship between habit and data, see Chun (2016: 372).



Image 4: Spire Breathing Log

In this space, anxiety takes on a specific form of futurity that mirrors Freud's reading of a central symptom of anxiety, *anxious expectation*, which he describes in a series of gendered examples:

"A woman, for instance, who suffers from anxious expectation will think of influenzal pneumonia every time her husband coughs when he has a cold, and, in her mind's eye, will see his funeral go past; if, when she is coming towards the house, she sees two people standing by her front door, she cannot avoid thinking that one of her children has fallen out of the window; when she hears the bell ring, it is someone bringing news of a death, and so on – while on all these occasions there has been no particular ground for exaggerating a mere possibility." (Freud, 1926: 92)

Just as Freud's expectant subject invites anxiety through a specific orientation – through a mode of apprehending the world that always opens to a catastrophic future – the Spire breathing app positions anxiety as an expectant state. That is, it posits the body as an alarm for arising anxiety that the subject can ultimately control. Spire's claim to therapeutic power comes from a deeply cognitive understanding of the ability of the mind to control the body then, as their promotional website explains, "Respiration is the only autonomic function you have control over" ("Spire", 2016), and it thus aims to transform anxiety into actionable data for the subject. As anxiety emerges as data the subject is invited to address its habitual nature, to track out the patterns, similarities and geographies of their anxiety and to seize control of these habits.

Curiously though, this cognitivist approach ultimately returns to the affective nature of anxiety. As Freud again makes clear, the slide between objects in

the moment of anxious expectation, the movement from a cough to influenza and from a doorbell to death, is a transformative one that reveals the atmospheric nature of anxiety; it is, he writes, as if "a *quantum of anxiety in a freely floating space* is present, which, where there is expectation, controls the choice of ideas and is always ready to link itself with any suitable ideational content" (Freud, 1926: 92). From within this *quantum of free-floating anxiety* we see that the affective and predictive power of anxiety comes from its role as a *pre-sentiment*: it emerges prior to its objects, it is an orientation and an approach to the world. Following this, as research into the slide between anxiety and anxiety disorders has routinely shown, there is a clear form of embodiment where the anxious subject is overly aware of their own anxiety and Spire, in its constant system of monitoring and alerting, externalizes and visualizes this anxious orientation as a data set.[14] Thus, in the logic of the Spire breathing application, the experience of anxiety is predictive as both a data set – it is trackable, monitorable and understood as preventable – and as an affect – it is a looping *pre-sentiment* that reproduces anxious expectations and anxious orientations.

In order to assure its users that Spire can ultimately interrupt the recurrent anxieties that the application is itself visualizing, Spire relies on a topographic record for the user – it pinpoints the location of an anxious moment and represents that back to the user as a GPS located dot on the map (See Image 5) – to provide a sense of distanciation and objectification from the self. Just as Nike+ relies on blurring the lines between subject and object through both a conflation and distanciation of the two, Spire equally transposes the automaticity of affect and anxiety into the control of cartography. This slide, from the run to the satellite and from the breath to the map, operates like the *function of the key* in Lacan's reading of anxiety in that it is both in line with the emergent digital aesthetic of self-tracking and is constantly creating and enacting the very mode of aestheticization that has developed in response to these same technologies. In this way, Spire's ability to track the autonomic functions of the body and to transform these functions into a data set that offers the promise of control reveals the anxiety of a broader contemporary moment – it reveals how the habituated and repetitive conflation of the digital and embodied self, the unending movement between subject and object, opens up to a new digital aesthetic marked by a sense of in-betweenness and an ongoing free-fall.

[14] As Clark and Beck have made clear, "Individuals prone to panic are oriented toward selectively attending to internal somatic or mental processes…The orienting mode in panic disorder is primed towards rapid detection of interoceptive cues that could represent an immediate and imminent danger to survival" (Clark & Beck, 2010: 289).

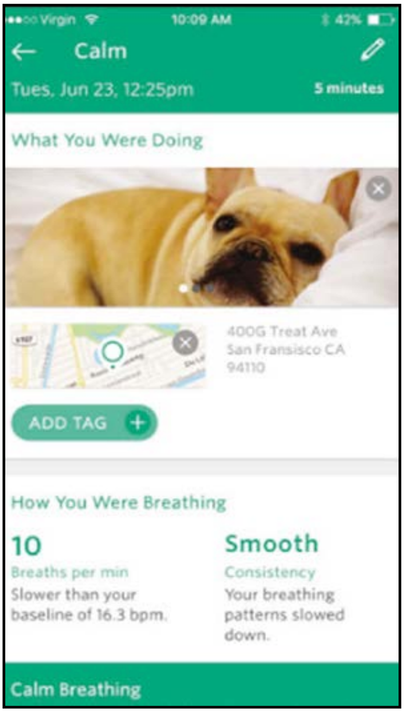


Image 5: Spire GPS Map

The decision to offer satellite visions of anxious moments and miles run offered by both Spire and Nike+ works specifically within this digital aesthetic as it attempts to transform the perpetual sense of movement and free-fall into the uncertain possibility of stability. That is, these applications draw on our growing familiarity and comfort with seeing the world from above to replicate our belief in the stability of the ground and to confirm the stability of the self in the world. Again, as Steyerl has argued, this view functions through the supposition of stability while, in fact, it moves subjectivity away from the ground and into the liminal space of the screen:

"…many of the aerial views, 3D nose-dives, Google Maps, and surveillance panoramas do not actually portray a stable ground. Instead, they create a supposition that it exists in the first place. Retroactively, this virtual ground creates a perspective of overview and surveillance for a distanced, superior, spectator safely floating up in the air…This establishes a new visual normality – a new subjectivity folded into surveillance technology and screen-based distraction." (Steyerl, 2011)

The stable ground of Google Maps and surveillance panoramas is less illusion than it is uncertainty here; it is not false, but it is not consistent either. In Steyerl's reading, this emergent digital aesthetic of the free-fall is built on an ever-present anxiety and an ever-present supposition of stability.[15]

[15] Steyerl presents this particular aesthetic against a longer historical backdrop based around the shift from linear perspective to the perspective of the free-fall. In this way, she is able to present the contemporary moment as one that

In the discursive and aesthetic construction of self-tracking applications this same logic underlies the users' supposition of the self. That is, just as surveillance and mapping applications rely on the uncertain possibility of stable ground, the drive behind the self-tracking application relies on the uncertain possibility of a stable self. As Morozov makes clear:

> "Members of the Quantified Self movement may not always state this explicitly, but one hidden hope behind self-tracking is that numbers might eventually reveal some deeper inner truth about who we really are, what we really want, and where we really ought to be. The movement's fundamental assumption is that the numbers can reveal a core and stable self – if only we get the technology right." (Morozov, 2013: 307)

Within the logic of self-tracking, the self is revealed to be an uncertain supposition. There is certainly a belief in its existence, but this belief both fuels and is fuelled by the repetitions of the self-tracking application; it is fuelled by a belief that with the right level of precision we may ultimately capture ourselves on the screen. The desire here is both pragmatic, a question of fitness and well-being, and existential, a question of who we really are and what we can be. Both Nike+ and Spire demonstrate the aesthetic connections between these novel forms of self-construction and new mapping and surveillance technologies because, just as the they posit a stable horizon, a ground that the subject could theoretically run and breathe on, they equally posit the possibility of a solid grounded self. In this way, self-tracking applications work through an aestheticization of the self that is necessarily a question of both proximity and distance: by pulling on this new digital aesthetic of the free-fall and the non-space, self-tracking applications are able to extract an image from our most embodied experiences – running, sleeping, eating, breathing – in order to offer a potentially malleable, digital version of those experiences.

We are presented then with a paradoxical anxiety: the movement to construct a second self within the field of an emergent digital aesthetic is fuelled by an anxiety to create distance between the self as subject and the self as object, yet it equally maintains an ongoing anxiety by consistently impeding this distanciation, by consistently reminding the user that the digital self and the

is different from the past as the traditional rules and logic that govern linear perspective are revealed to be without grounding. In this way, the present is characterized by a sense of free-fall, a groundlessness, and an uncertainty that is both frightening and potentially liberating. See Steyerl (2011).

everyday self are somehow one and the same; they are somehow conflated. The diegetic and non-diegetic cannot be pulled apart; the screen is the liminal space between selves – it is simultaneously mirror and Other. Further to this, as Lacan makes clear with regard to the object of anxiety and the object of desire – in this case the anxiety emergent from the desire for the digital self on the screen and the confirmation of that idealized screen self – there is no distance between the self and the object; movement between the two is not possible, "you are *a*, the object, and everyone knows that this is what is intolerable" (Lacan, 2014: 103). In this way, the anxiety behind the desire to distance the subject (the runner, the body) from its object (the digital profile, the satellite) is an anxiety of impediment; it is the moment when "movement is reduced to agitation, a kind of inexpedient-tentative running in place" and when "affect is known by a more specific name; it is called anxiety" (Copjec, 2006: 96).

What is ultimately revealed through this arrested movement, through the moment when running is transformed into stationary data, is the uncertain supposition – of both the self and of self-analysis – that fuels the contemporary moment. The images of the self produced by the tracking application, a spectral self, a self in process and a self in translation, only accrue meaning with their constant repetition. But this same repetition reveals the very falsity of the whole self as, through its proliferation and automated production, the data of self-tracking is a form of writing the self: an inscription and an attempt to exert control on the self in order to create a narrative map towards a different future and a different person that will necessarily never exist. Anxiety emerges in this writing because of both the desire to move towards that future and the impediment to this movement.

4. Conclusion: "There is No Auto-Analysis"

In Lacan's understanding of anxiety, inhibition is most clearly about the halting of movement but impediment is a more complex form of blockage (Lacan, 2014: 10). For Lacan, impediment draws its force not from simply stopping the subject; rather it works as a type of ensnarement where "it implies the relationship between one dimension and something that comes to interfere with it and which, in what interests us, impedes not the function, a term of reference, not movement, which is rendered difficult, but truly and verily the subject" (2014: 10). Impediment's power is that it exists as a threshold with-

held – the subject is arrested between possibilities, between one dimension and something else – and the subject is caught within itself. Just as anxiety presents itself as the cut, as the space between furrowed lips, and as the possibility of attaining the real, impediment reveals itself as a similarly liminal space.

In the case of the obsessive patient, for example, Lacan notes that impediment produces anxiety precisely at the level where the subject is uncertain about the meaning of an act, where the object of desire is unclear and in-between different registers, and where, "*He didn't know it was that*, and this is why, at the level of the point at which *he can't impede himself*, he lets go, namely, the to and fro of the signifier that posits and effaces by turns" (2014: 319). As desire moves the obsessive subject forward, he becomes anxious just as he cannot stop himself and he gives himself over to the infinite chain of discourse; he gives himself over to writing, to inscription, to the construction of an imagined Other. As a reminder that the signifier is itself a trace of the lost remainder of the whole self that drives desire forward, the obsessive's relationship to impediment and anxiety reveals how automated self-tracking fuels an insatiable slide into anxiety. As we work to separate an idealized digital self from our selves in the name of auto-analysis – that is, as we look for the cut, or the distance that would allow us access to our true selves – we are left chasing an uncertain object of desire that is, again as Lacan has reminded us, that very self we are fleeing from.

Fantasy steps in here as our guiding principle as, in these moments of anxiety, we look for a plane of consistency, a space of stability to cover our uncertainty.[16] In this way, the rise of automated self-tracking gestures to something far beyond our own individual anxieties; it gestures to a collective fantasy, to an emerging aesthetic and logic of the present that is part of the larger structure of feeling of the present. In this way, thinking through the prevailing mood for self-tracking can "provide a way to articulate the shaping and structuring effect of historical context on our affective attachments" (Flatley, 2008: 18). That is, the mood of self-tracking can give us a larger sense of how the structure of communicative capitalism, animated by Jodi Dean in her work *Blog Theory* (2010b), best illustrates our psychic experience of the ongoing present situation. As an envelope that holds the subject in place despite ceding them a sense of political agency and mobility, communicative capitalism is, for Dean, the "materialization of democratic ideals in the contemporary information and

[16] Renata Salecl makes clear that fantasy emerges as a way to make sense of, and assuage, our anxieties, explaining that, "Fantasy is a way for the subject to cover up the lack of by creating a scenario, a story that gives him or her consistency. However, fantasy also helps prevent the emergence of anxiety" (Salecl, 2004: 14).

entertainment networks necessary for globalized neoliberalism" (Dean, 2010a: 21). This materialization relies explicitly on the circulation of affect to ensure the subject's repeated participation and engagement. Building upon Lacan's theory of drives, Dean sees this present form of capitalism as one that thrives "not because of unceasing or insatiable desires but in and as the repetitive intensity of drive" (2010a: 30). It is through habituation, through the the repetition and ongoing participation of the subject in the capitalist sphree, that they come to intuit their own place within this network. Even as a model of online participation and communication, Dean most clearly gets to the heart of our fantasy of participation and communication in everyday life by articulating the excessive, and modulated, repetition that keeps a subject attached to modes of being and that propels our participation in the present. As she explains:

> "Insofar as affect as a movement designates a doubling of an image, utterance, perception, or sound into itself and something else, we can account for the affective discharge or reflexivized communication. The additive dimension of communication for its own sake designates an excess. This excess isn't a new meaning or perspective. It doesn't refer to a new content. It is rather the intensity accrued from the repetition, the excitement or thrill of more. In the reflexive doubling of communication, the enjoyment attached to communication for its own sake displaces intention, content, and meaning. The something extra in repetition is enjoyment, the enjoyment that captures us in drive, and the enjoyment communicative capitalism expropriates." (Dean, 2010a: 39)

Dean draws out the doubling of affect and its parallelism with the doubled object of communication, the image, utterance, perception or sound, where this mirroring is established as the communicative object is repeated, forwarded, passed along through the network. While she is obviously imagining a more literal doubling of the object in online communication – the forwarded image of, say, a cute cat is doubled not just as affect in the subject and as information on the screen, but also as information received and transmitted out – the excessive that ensnares the subject in the loops and ebbs, and anxieties and pleasures, of online forwarding is not unique to one structure of communication. That is, this excessive doubling is mirrored in the self-tracking application's doubling of the self: at once subject and object, satellite and body, experience and data.

And the fantasy of self-tracking is that it can both end, and maintain, this doubling. Self-tracking in this mode of anxiety is an affective tool for judgment

and a mode of evaluating the self; it is a distancing aestheticized in the quantified numbers and satellite views of a self. In this distancing, self-tracking presents itself as an automated fantasy Other, where, just as the infant enthralled by their image in the mirror looks over their shoulder to confirm this image with the Other, automated tracking is a form of affective looping where this writing works by "summoning up a companion in the imagination in order to feel the pressure of the other's gaze" (Dean, 2010b: 50). The affective force here, between the self as writer and the imagined and inscribed self as object, is transformed into an automated relationship that only furthers an appearance of objectification and, thus, operates as the anxious push that moves the self away from the subject in order to gain the *critical distance* necessary to pass judgment. To this end, the act of self-tracking mirrors the act of faltering online communication and, in writing the self through automation it opens up to jouissance and to a specific hope for erasure of the self. There is, as Eugenie Brinkema makes clear, a masochism at work in the reflexive pronoun, in the myself of ourselves:

> "A special form of masochism hinges on the problem of a reflexive pronoun – in the movement from *I like to be hurt* to *I like to hurt myself*, lost is the logic of intersubjective desire (the implied "by you" of masochism proper), and gained is the signifier that represents me to the statement (my own "myself"). In this movement, a supplement appears: the doubled *I/myself* found only in the second instance. Agent of desire in iteration one becomes agent of desiring annihilation in iteration two, but, significantly, what is effected in the second sentence is a split – the gashing cut of the diagonal slash that forever holds apart *I/myself*." (Brinkema, 2009: 131)

This masochism, as a type of desire to annihilate the self, is the masochism of self-help books and of therapeutic discourses; it is the masochism of living in and through the neoliberal present.[17] This is very much the initial desire, the first affective push that produces our need to self-track. But when this desire becomes automated – when the writing writes itself, when the journal becomes a sensor, and when the Other is replaced by the split my/self – desire is transformed into *jouissance*. There is no end to the chain of desire that could be quelled by reaching an ideal imagined object and we are all transformed into obsessives. Unable to stop ourselves from this automated writing, the desire to

[17] This form of masochism is perhaps best understood as part of larger projects to create narratives of self-reliance that have become a means for living through, and coping with, our contemporary neoliberal moment. For a clear description of the rise of these narratives of the self, see da Silva (2014).

control the self is transformed into a habitual loop of jouissance; we no longer know what object it is we are pursuing, and we are left pursuing our own desire, we are left doubled.

Repetition becomes essential to our means of self-tracking precisely because, as Dean argues, "The blockage or stuckness of anxiety, then, is at the same time the repetitive, circular movement of drive" (2010b: 118). Like the obsessive whose own impediment transforms anxiety into the infinite chain of writing and language, or our own desire to self track that cannot impede this same slide, Dean reveals Lacan's larger claim that anxiety is at the centre of the movement between jouissance and desire.[18] That is, the desire that sets us forth in our attempts at self-tracking – a desire to know our true selves, a desire to become our idealized and perfect whole selves – is very quickly transformed into the jouissance that drives us towards our unreachable objects of desire, our *objet petit a*. Where we imagine we are in control of this digital self, automated tracking reveals it to be an insatiable loop, a never-to-be-completed mode of inscribing the self that necessarily inserts us back into the infinite chain of the signifier. Without an end in sight, our pleasure is infinitely impeded and we are left chasing ourselves in perpetuity.

This, then, drops us right back into the free-fall. As Steyerl has made clear, in the moment of falling, "you will probably feel as if you are floating – or not even moving at all" (Steyerl, 2011). The impediment of anxiety, the stuckness of our uncertainty blocks the hopeful move towards an idealized self and we, the subject-on-the-screen and the subject-in-the-flesh, end up ensnared together, caught in a type of free-fall. When we are faced with both an uncertain grounding and uncertain self, when the aesthetic of self-tracking and the anxiety of auto-analysis meet headlong, the sensation of falling becomes equally uncertain because "Falling is relational – if there's nothing to fall towards, you may not even be aware that you're falling" (Steyerl, 2011). Here the subject and object, the runner and its data, the body and the satellite, the breather and their anxieties, are caught falling together and, left with no possibility of distancing one from the other, it becomes impossible to separate one from the other. Caught in the loops of automated tracking we are revealed to be our own objects of desire and our own anxious objects.

[18] See Lacan, 2014: 320.

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ORIGINAL SCIENTIFIC PAPER

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Digital Feminisms and the Split Subject: Short-circuits through Lacan's Four Discourses

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Abstract: *This paper takes the emergent field of digital feminisms as a case for thinking about the ways in which Jacques Lacan's theory of the four discourses – that of the master, hysteric, university, and analyst – can contribute to our understanding of the subject in digitally mediated communications. Lacan's theory is useful in articulating the relationship between the feminist subject, knowledge production, and the modes of enjoyment that structure speech particularly where feminist discourses are animated in digital communications. As a protest discourse, feminist discourse has been equated with the productive discourse of the hysteric, but once institutionalized, I argue, it takes on the structure of the university discourse, bypassing the critical phase of the analyst. Digital feminisms offer a particularly reflective case for understanding this structural shift as, with no gatekeepers, nothing impedes the personal becoming political in digitally mediated spaces. Here, the structure of feminist discourses is amplified, exposing the dynamic affects in different discursive positions that obfuscate communication and make 'true dialogue' problematic. Drawing on Lacan's theory of the four discourses, I map some of these affects as digital feminist discourses shift into the position of knowledge (what Lacan calls* S_2*), where they are divided – cut off from their own experience and enjoyment – and positioned to address the jouissance of the Other. In this, I hope to show how Lacan's theory of discourse offers a means of understanding the frustrations felt in much digitally mediated communication.*

Keywords*: digital feminisms, the subject, Lacan, discourse of the hysteric, discourse of the university, jouissance, knowledge, affect*

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1. Introduction

This paper offers a theoretical consideration of the ways in which we might understand digital feminist discursive practices through Jacques Lacan's theory of the four discourses articulated in seminar XVII (2007). Within Lacan's theory of the four discourses – that of the master, hysteric, university, and analyst – feminist discourse has traditionally been equated with that of the hysteric (Bracher, 2006) for, as I elaborate in this paper, it is a 'protest' discourse associated with social, political, and epistemological change. This protest takes on many forms, from every-day rejections of social norms, to more theoretical rejections of the language used to create those norms. The work of *écriture féminine* is perhaps the most literal example in that it identifies with hysterical speech where it is perceived to be the only legitimate form of female discourse within phallocentric cultures, and mobilizes this discourse of protest to articulate a radical woman's political *aesthetic* (Dane, 1994: 241). In protesting the status-quo, feminist discourse (as with hysterical discourse) speaks an epistemic desire: it generates a desire for knowledge. Yet even in its early association with hysterical discourse – seen by many as a proto-feminist protest (Showalter, 1987) – feminist discourse has drawn on personal, subjective experience to protest the status quo. Drawing on Lacan's theory of discourse, I show how the affective quality of this knowledge (and aesthetic) production creates counter-productive conflicts *within* feminist discourses that are exacerbated in digitally mediated spaces.

Digital technologies have provided a particularly useful stage for feminist protest, where platforms like Twitter can aggregate isolated voices into collective political movements. An emerging field of scholarship engaged in the study of what I broadly call 'digital feminisms' canvases a variety of feminist discourses and practices that use digitally mediated platforms and services to mobilize feminist agendas, protest, and praxis. With some speculating that the affordances of digital media technologies have generated a fourth "wave" of feminism (Phillips & Cree, 2014: 938) that challenges mainstream media representations of a *post*-feminist era (Gill, 2016: 613), this field of scholarship has focused on organized "hashtag" feminisms (Portwood-Stacer & Berridge, 2014) and networked communities in the form of blogs, as well as activist and pedagogical websites, YouTube channels, tumblrs and memes (for example, Baer, 2016; Fotopoulou, 2016; Khoja-Moolji, 2015; Pruchniewska, 2016; Scharff,

Smith-Prei, and Stehle, 2016; Seidman, 2013; Taylor, 2011; Thrift, 2014; Vivienne, 2016). Included in these forms of digital feminisms are moments when feminist discourse is invoked (and re-distributed) in digitally mediated spaces to express feminist knowledge and assert feminist identities in ways that may or may not be organized or *intended* forms of feminist praxis or pedagogy (see, for example, Dobson, 2015; Keller, 2016; Thelandersson, 2014). Indeed, within the age of media convergence it can be difficult to separate digital feminist discourses – activism, protest, and praxis – from offline discourses given that digital platforms and services allow for the promotion, sharing, and pedagogic redistribution of some of these offline (or analogue) activities. Despite their intention or origin, then, digital feminisms share common characteristics with the discourses and praxis of non-digital feminisms, such as disparities in the production of feminist knowledge with considerable debate over their authenticity and definitional positions. Such characteristics are enhanced, however, through digital technologies, platforms, and services because these technologies give voice to disparate discourses and agendas, and allow them to be widely shared and distributed. Nowhere is this more evident than in the contrasting tumblrs' "Who Needs Feminism?" and "Women Against Feminism", where privileged *and* marginal voices are mobilized into conflicting forms of protest. Indeed, the proliferation of feminist discourses in digitally mediated spaces sees the blend of amateur, professional, and celebrity voices create and imagine feminism for the new millennium with a contrariness indicative of the post-feminist era (see Horbury, 2015).

Yet where digital technologies promise the ability to subvert the political and economic hierarchies of media industries, the resulting frustrations in digital feminist communication often seem inexplicable. While tentatively celebrating the revolutionary possibilities of the digital sphere (to overcome barriers of distance, difference, time, generation, knowledge, economics, and power in the production of feminist discourse) feminist scholarship is equally cautious in detailing the emerging threats to this utopia (see, for example, Baer, 2016; Cole, 2015; Dobson, 2015; Keller, 2016; Khoja-Moolji, 2015; Pruchniewska, 2016; Thelandersson, 2014; Vivienne, 2016). The tenor of this scholarship nevertheless tacitly invokes both user and producer of digitally mediated culture as a fantasy of Enlightenment thinking, where digital feminists are perceived to be the perfect produsers who challenge the hierarchies of traditional media

industries. Undermining this fantasy of a rational subject of discourse, however, is the production of radically inassimilable ideas denoted in the rise of "toxic Twitter wars" and feminist in-fighting over the authenticity and legitimacy of feminist knowledge (see Thelandersson, 2014). The provocation of trolls within digital feminist communities contributes to this discord and, I suggest, reveals the particular composition of feminist knowledge in this space.[2] For where trolls contest the legitimacy of feminist knowledge (for amusement or malicious enjoyment), this can, as Ganzer observes, *replicate* feminist in-fighting (2014), where it exposes the role of affect in knowledge, discourse, and communication, as I explore in this paper.

Drawing on a variety of digital feminist discursive practices that are illustrative rather than exhaustive, I sketch some observations regarding the effects of these practices where they shift from the 'productive' discourse of the hysteric to that of the university in the construction of an ideal feminist identity online. In particular, I introduce Lacan's theory of discourse to explore the impact of this shift on the productive character of digital feminisms as well as the experience of subjects occupying this position. In addition to the institutionalization of feminisms within the academy, the sheer volume of production afforded by digital technology – and the erosion of distinctions between amateur, professional, academic and celebrity voices – brings a symbolic weight to feminist knowledge production in digitally mediated spaces where I argue, it takes on the status of the 'big Other,' or S_2 in Lacan's matheme. Identification with it demonstrates, I suggest, the way in which feminism becomes a signifier constituting onscreen identity; it functions to support idiosyncratic subjects, offering a consistency via the guarantee of the big Other in S_2. Challenges to this signifier then, effectively act as a challenge to the subject's stability: as an attack on the screen that supports the fantasy of the subject's rational, symbolic existence, especially where the attack addresses feminist knowledge. Moreover, where feminist knowledge-as-S_2 becomes the ideal-ego of the agent's online identity, the agent of this structure occupies the discourse of the university in Lacan's schema, a split subject, cut-off from the subjective truth of their experience. The split subject speaks from the position of feminist knowledge to address the other who now occupies the position of object *a* in the matheme – what is lost

[2] I take Jonathan Bishop's definition of trolls as agents who deliberately antagonize other individuals or communities online with the aim of drawing them into a futile debate, either anonymously for personal (sadistic) pleasure, or publically in the spirit of communal humour (2014: 8–10).

to the subject, *jouissance*. Here, the agent of digital politics can be caught in the screen of the big Other, which alienates them from the truth of their own experience and where *jouissance* appears in the form of the Other's enjoyment.

1.2. Why Psychoanalysis?

To introduce psychoanalysis to the topic of digital feminisms may appear especially problematic, for though the analysis of women in various media spaces was initially informed by the psychoanalytic ideas taken up in second wave feminisms, Judith Butler's epistemic turn in *Gender Trouble* (2008) has reoriented this scholarship away from such engagements (see Horbury, 2015: 45). This leaves the field, as Peter Dahlgren has observed (2013), of media and communication studies more generally, with a subject assumed as a product of the Enlightenment: a rational being whose flexible and contingent persona is nevertheless *not* informed by any unconscious desires, conflicts, or fantasies. This assumption is incredibly problematic for feminist media studies, where, as I have argued elsewhere (Horbury, 2015: 41), the subject of this scholarship – texts for women and the audiences for them – over time become informed by the ideas of feminist scholarship. Here, the "triangular network of influence that has formed between critical feminist discourses, public cultural commentary, and the dramatization of women in media texts" can no longer be untangled or imagined outside of their relationship with one another (Horbury, 2015: 8). Where feminism is popularised in cultural production it is then absorbed back into feminist analysis and integrated into new feminist discourses, perhaps explaining, as Gill notes (2016), the confusing reemergence of feminist ideas in mainstream media alongside post-feminist sensibilities. Moving into the digital sphere only increases this triangular relationship as the line between textual user and producer becomes blurred, as does the line between academic and amateur production of feminist knowledge – albeit a blurring of an already permeable boundary. Nevertheless, any study of communication must take into account the subject of that communicative act – be it the producer or receiver of that act – and, as Marshall Alcorn succinctly puts it, "[t]o understand speech, as opposed to language, one must understand what it means to be a subject" (1994: 23). This is not to say that psychoanalytic thought offers a complete solution to the study of communication; rather, it constitutes a significant per-

spective that is absent from many efforts to theorize the subject of communicative praxis.

While psychoanalytic ideas have been entertained in media and communication studies, the scepticism with which they are treated and largely circumvented in the classroom is perhaps, as Roger Silverstone suggests, because "the shift from clinical theory and practice to cultural critique is fraught with obfuscation and the too-easy elision, often, of the particular and the general, as well as the arbitrariness (masked as theory) of interpretation and analysis" (1999: 11). Due to the complexly nuanced positions produced in the last sixty years of feminism in the West, what I sketch here may appear similarly limited. It is difficult to speak of or attempt to analyse – let alone theorize – feminist discourses in a general sense without appearing to reductively overlook important differences in theory and praxis, and I do not want to suggest that all utterances made by feminists fall into my analysis. I want to introduce Lacan's work on the subject's discourse, however, to consider the unconscious dimensions of (some) digital feminist discourses in the hope that these insights might be useful in understanding the ways in which digital communications more generally can be both productive and unproductive when the speaker inhabits or speaks from differently motivated subject positions.

2. The Four Discourses

Lacan's seminar XVII (1969-1970) develops a formula for thinking about the subject and their relation to discourse that "goes much further than actual utterances" (2007: 13) to try and understand the relationship between the subject and language (symbolic meaning and the world of shared knowledge), between the subject and their unconscious and, consequently, between the subject and their unique mode of (unconscious) enjoyment. Notably, Lacan's articulation of the four discourses is framed within his critique of science (Themi, 2014: 108) where it illuminates the limits of Enlightenment thinking that informs both feminist discourses and much media and communication theory. Both discourses assume, at the very least, that a subject (of media texts and producers of texts) is cognizant of their enjoyment and rationally invested in communication. Yet, paraphrasing Lacan, Susan Barnard reminds us that, as "knowledge and jouissance are inextricably" linked even in "ideal communication (e.g., a 'complete' text or an 'entire' oeuvre), interpretation confronts the

limits constituted by the particularity of the subject's jouissance – the way in which a given subject 'gets off' on (in this case) a text" (2002: 3). Lacan's understanding of the ways in which particular subject positions enjoy or "gets off" on different types of texts – though seemingly an "obvious point that readers come to any text with very different interests, motivations, and strategies of reading" (Barnard, 2002: 3) – is particularly useful in contemplating digital feminist discourses because feminist discourses produce both a field of discursive *knowledge* that one may be drawn to on the basis of a certain enjoyment and, when this knowledge is identified with, a speaking *position* related to a particular mode of enjoyment. The modes of enjoyment implicated in this speaking position offer an insight, I suggest, into the conflicts produced in digital feminist discourses.

In articulating something of the relationship between the subject and language – knowledge, the unconscious, and modes of enjoyment – Lacan's work also formulates something of "the social bonds we form with each other" (Themi, 2014: 108). The four discourses are thus useful because, as Mark Bracher puts it, they "offer the means, respectively, of understanding four key social phenomena" that correlate to the four positions of the university, master, hysteric, and analyst: that of "educating, governing, protesting, and revolutionizing" (1994b: 107). These four positions and phenomena have the effect of "mobilizing" "ordering" and "repressing", in turn, "four key psychological factors – knowledge/belief, values/ideals, self-division/alienation, and jouissance/enjoyment" (Bracher, 1994b: 109). Lacan uses a "matheme" to represent the four discourses (see Figure 1), while the underlying schema of each discourse – the functions of each position regardless of which discourse is in play – are outlined in Figure 2.

Discourse of the master	Discourse of the university	Discourse of the hysteric	Discourse of the analyst
$\frac{S_1}{\$} \rightarrow \frac{S_2}{a}$	$\frac{S_2}{S_1} \rightarrow \frac{a}{\$}$	$\frac{\$}{a} \rightarrow \frac{S_1}{S_2}$	$\frac{a}{S_2} \rightarrow \frac{\$}{S_1}$

Figure 1: The four discourses (Lacan, 2007: 69)

$$\frac{\text{agent}}{\text{truth}} \rightarrow \frac{\text{other}}{\text{production}}$$

Figure 2: The formula of discourse (Lacan, 1999: 17)

In the top left position is the operative "agent" of the discourse (Lacan, 2007: 169), which, in the master's discourse is identified as S_1 (see Figure 1), the signifier that stands in for the subject who has entered into language and the symbolic realm of meaning (the Symbolic in Lacan's tripartite register of experience, Real, Imaginary, and Symbolic). Tim Themi notes that while this agent might be likened to the subject's "conscious mind or ego" (2014: 109), Lacan also refers to this position as a site of *desire* (see Figure 4), and thus denotes the operative function of the unconscious in the agent's actions and discourse for, in Lacan's terms, "the agent" is "someone who is *caused* to act" (2007: 169: my emphasis). Beneath the agent, or as Lacan puts it, "beneath the bar" that separates what is known from what is unknown to the subject, is the site of truth, that which is relinquished upon entering into language and the Symbolic order of symbolization that "defines" one "as a subject" (see Themi, 2014: 109). In other words, though the subject is realized through a signifier (S_1) that "represents a subject, and nothing but a subject, for another signifier" (Lacan, 2007: 47–8), it is incomplete: the signifier is not reducible to the "subject of knowledge" because "there is something underneath" (Lacan, 2007: 48). This something underneath, Themi notes, is not necessarily something the agent is aware of (2014: 109) but, significantly for feminist discourses (as I will elaborate later) it constitutes "sexual knowledge" or knowledge of the drives (Lacan 2007: 93) – in Freudian terms id or libido. This "truth" beneath the bar of the agent in the bottom left position (see Figure 2) is what the subject knows without knowing (Lacan 2007: 93) and denotes the subject "divided" by language, which Lacan represents through the symbol $ (see Figure 3).

$$\frac{\text{master signifier}}{\text{subject}} \rightarrow \frac{\text{knowledge}}{\textit{jouissance}}$$

Figure 3: Formula for the subject of discourse (Lacan, 2007: 92)

$$\frac{\text{desire}}{\text{truth}} \rightarrow \frac{\text{Other}}{\text{loss}}$$

Figure 4: The effects of each position in the formula (Lacan, 2007: 93)

In the top right position of the underlying schema is the role of the Symbolic order, the field or network of signifiers that constitute the socio-symbolic realm (see Figure 3): language and its production of knowledge, what is "already there" prior to the subject's being (Lacan, 2007: 13) represented as S_2. One of the practical advantages of Lacan's schema is its ability to identify what each of the four discourses *produces* for, relative to whichever discourse is in the position of agent, the bottom right position denotes the product of that speaking subject's discourse (see Figure 2).

In the master's discourse (see Figure 1), the agent looks towards S_2, the position most associated with work (see Lacan, 2007: 169), but the product or result of this discourse is object *a*, or *jouissance,* an excess of enjoyment or pleasure beyond normal limits. That is, the price of being situated as an agent, as a master, is the loss of *jouissance*. One labours towards the field of S_2, but must relinquish certain parts of one's desire to do so; this is what Lacan identifies as "symbolic" castration, which separates our pure being in the world from the mediated experience enabled through the acquisition of language. Such a process requires letting go of being (unmediated existence), in order to *mean* something in symbolic terms, which effectively creates a divided subject ($). What is useful in understanding the structure of the master's discourse then, as Lacan puts it, is that the master is an illusion because any master is symbolically castrated (2007: 128). Themi notes that the quality of lost *jouissance* in the bottom right position (see Figures 3 and 4), can "contain anything pertaining to a loosening of the means required to sustain a masterly position" (2014: 109) and, moreover, might be seen as potentially destructive to the order of things (from work, for instance), because this *jouissance*

> "signals what remains of, and what can lead to, the most intense or anguished type of desire we have, luring us back beyond the usual limits of the pleasure principle to repeat some kind of "ruinous," nonproductive, nonutilitarian "loss"—to the point of "masochism," Lacan adds, or maybe even "death." (Themi, 2014: 110)

The danger associated with this mysterious *jouissance* in the form of object *a*, the cause of our desire, is animated in many *noir* films, for example, where the lure of the enigmatic *fatale* figure can see the hero – or heroine in the case of *neo-noir* – risk all for the possibility of attaining lost enjoyment. The discourse of the hysteric, however, has a different relationship with enjoyment.

3. The Discourse of the Hysteric & its Product

As a discourse of protest equated with challenging social, political, and epistemological norms, feminist discourse correlates to the hysteric's discourse in Lacan's theory (see Figure 1), where its "industrious" product (the bottom right position) is knowledge: S_2 (Lacan, 2007: 33). I want to canvas some of the ways we might gain a new appreciation of the mechanisms of feminist discourses where they operate through the hysterical structure, before considering how these discourses operate in digitally mediated spaces. For it is the knowledge product of digital feminist discourses that exacerbates conflict in online spaces because it addresses the Other with a response that is symptomatic of a problem – sexual difference and what Lacan calls the "no sexual relation" – rather than a solution. Sexuation for Lacanians designates the process of situating oneself in relation to sexual difference, but does not follow a strictly essentialist or reductive process of establishing gendered identities upon biological differences that might aim or result in complimentary couplings. Psychoanalysts identify masculine and feminine subject positions distinct from the sexed bodies that inhabit these positions, but these terms do not correlate with commonly understood notions of 'gender' in feminist and queer theory. As Barnard puts it, in Western discourses gender and sex are largely "framed in terms of either natural science, phenomenology, or forms of sociohistorical analysis and cultural studies" where the emphasis is on the symbolic rendering of the body and experiences of embodiment that are "socially constructed" (2002: 4). In contrast, masculine and feminine positions in Lacanian psychoanalytic discourse refer to "one's position vis-à-vis the Other, and the type of jouissance one is able to obtain" (Barnard, 2002: 5), the process of which – sexuation – may include (but is not limited to) identifications with sexed bodies and social positions. Lacan's famous statement that there is "no sexual relation" (see 1999: 63) more aptly refers to this dynamic, in that masculine and feminine subjects (psychical structures) strive towards different forms of *jouissance*: there is no correlation or complementary

symmetry in their aims. Simply put, they "do not relate to what their partners relate to in them" (Barnard, 2002: 8).

This non-relation is at the crux of the discourse of the hysteric. The agent of this discourse ($) speaks *as* a divided subject above the bar, where the "discordance between Symbolic and Real" of experience is never adequately resolved through language, but is expressed "openly and painfully" (Bracher, 1994a: 7). The product of this structure, S_2 (the bottom right position), is unconscious – it is a discourse that signifies beneath the bar. As Julien Quackelbeen et al. note, "the hysteric has a relation to truth that is quite unique" because their speech produces "the unconscious truth of the subject" which is "not a question of the truth of facts […] but of *the truth that determines motives*, that defines *what torments the subject*" (1994: 134; my emphasis). For the hysteric is one who has, however tentatively or temporarily, refused to identify with the available master signifiers – one who has refused symbolic castration – and instead speaks their "suffering" from the position of the divided subject where, as Alicia Arenas et al. put it, language "tears up" the "body" (1994: 148). Bracher observes that the hysteric's discourse takes its name from cases of hysterical neurosis in the clinic, denoted in symptoms that speak to "the subject's refusal to embody – literally, to give his or her body over to – the master signifiers that constitute the subject positions that society, through language, makes available to individuals" (1993: 66). In speaking from the position of division, the hysteric's discourse is subsequently structured as a question – a demand to the Other in the form of the master signifier (S_1) occupying the top right position (Quackelbeen et al., 1994: 133): "what is a woman?" (Lacan, 2000: 175). For Lacan, the speech of the hysteric "assumes its sense only as a function of a response that has to be formulated concerning this fundamentally symbolic relation" (2000: 170), between the Real of the body (its partial drives, impulses, and desires), and the representative possibilities of this body in the Symbolic.

In speaking as agent from the position of a divided subject, the hysteric thus draws attention to the tenuous agency of the subject of discourse for the hysteric "speaks, as agent, from the lack and gaps in knowledge, language, and being" (Ragland-Sullivan, 1992: 164). The hysteric's discourse subsequently exposes "the no sexual relation": that one's personal mode of *jouissance* does not necessarily find its counterpart in the Other. Yet this (unconscious) knowledge, and the problem of representing Woman in the universal (capital W) within

the Symbolic, can lead to the "cult of Woman" where, as with much feminist discourse from the second wave, the hysteric "unceasingly look[s] for this non-existent signifier" (Quackelbeen et al., 1994: 132). As Lacan reminds us, Sigmund Freud's famous question "what does a woman want" denotes a definite article; it is not Woman in the universal but "[*a*] woman" which "locate[s] the question at the level of desire" (2007: 129).

The association of feminism with the discourse of the hysteric is not uncontroversial given that many (if not most) feminist discourses reject Sigmund Freud's work on hysteria. As Lisa Appignanesi and John Forrester observe, the "first wave of feminist historiography painted the hysteric as a victim" of male institutional power at a time when social structures were undergoing significant upheaval such that the hysteric was situated as "a front line casualty of the intensified war of men on their womenfolk's aspirations and protests" towards equality (2000: 68). Elaine Showalter (1987: 160) thus describes the hysteric's protest as "protofeminism" where, similarly, as a response to the restrictions imposed on women within nineteenth century bourgeois circles, hysteria has been described as "feminism lacking a social network in the outer world" (Hunter, 1983: 485). One might assume, then, that there are no more antiquated hysterics given the loosening of restrictions on women resulting from the widespread impact of feminism and other social upheavals in the West. Indeed, some might argue that feminism is the *solution* to the nineteenth-century woman's problems, if not contemporary problems regarding sexual difference.

Yet the links between feminism and hysteria continue to manifest in their mutual interests – interests that speak to the ways in which (some) feminist discourses, as hysterical discourses, are cathected to conflicts regarding social and symbolic values surrounding sexuate positions. That is, some feminist discourses speak (protest) in symptom form and thus perpetuate rather than resolve the individual's unconscious conflicts. Appignanesi and Forrester point out (2000: 68–9), for example, that many first wave feminists were caught up in "temperance and social purity movements" effecting a protest towards male sexual immorality in much the same way as the hysteric, who, *identifying* with the morality of bourgeois values, protests sexual immorality cannot be "avowed" in their own being (see also Goldstein, 1982: 325). That is to say, the hysteric's discourse is "caught up in conflicts between ideals and desire – in Lacanian terms, between S_1 and *a*" (Bracher, 1993: 66). This conflict is evident

in contemporary forms of feminist in-fighting over appropriate sexual ethics in sex-work and pornography; here morality is leveraged against desire because desire is often only attributed to men (see Horbury, 2015: 52, 130–1), mirroring the hysteric's relation to the master. For where the hysteric has refused the process of symbolic castration, the master has accepted it in order to occupy the position of master and has thus accepted (to some extent) their humility as a subject of discourse (to be motivated by unconscious desire), while the hysteric refuses, "attempt[ing] to cover up the humiliation that the symbolic finally brings", via their Imaginary (Quackelbeen et al., 1994: 131). Arguably, where a feminist discourse appears overly puritanical towards sex and sex-work, they might be said to be speaking from this hysterical structure that refuses to be humiliated by desire, and builds a moral defence against it in their imaginary. But the Imaginary register is not necessarily shared or recognized by others – it does not directly equate to the Symbolic. For while the signifiers of language belong to the Symbolic, what is *signified* is situated in the subject's "imaginary order" (Evans, 1996: 83). Any solution to impasses between Real and Symbolic forged in one's Imaginary, then, are sutured to one's idiosyncratic experience as a subject and the modes of enjoyment structured therein. The Imaginary realms of feminist discourses where they inhabit the hysteric's structure consequently become significant sites of discord.

4. Feminist Discourses in Digitally Mediated Spaces

In feminist discourses from the second wave onwards, the equivalence with hysterical discourse continues in that the hysteric's resistance to the status quo forms "common feminist practice" (Leavy, 2006: 31). Moreover, like Freud's hysterical patients, feminist discourse addresses the status quo (the Symbolic order or Other) with a question regarding its ability to represent, symbolically, their being. As Bracher puts it (1993: 67), "feminist criticism protests with verbal discourse what Freud's hysterical patients (most of them women) protested through the physiological discourse of their bodily symptoms". And where feminism has drawn on psychoanalysis is precisely to question the status of the position 'woman' and its construction through language (for example, Butler, 2011; Grosz, 1990). Within digitally mediated feminist discourses, the problem of sexual difference continues to be the subject of protest and debate. Much of this discourse is composed of slippages and equivocations between the rejection

of sexual difference in pursuit of equality in terms of power (status and financial recompense) and the reassertion of difference in claims of special victimhood. Yet repressing difference for power can be counterproductive because beneath the bar of this discourse is the question of equality as regards desire and enjoyment (pleasure). For example, much feminist discourse has been generated in digitally mediated spaces in response to Instagram's censorship policy on female breasts, menstrual blood, and pubic hair. *The Guardian*'s feminist columnist Jessica Valenti articulates a common feminist protest in response to this inequality of representation (2015), arguing that the visibility of female anatomy and bodily functions is only censored when they break with representations of 'woman' *vis-à-vis* feminine masquerade. Different social taboos placed on the visibility of breasts/chests, menstrual blood/semen/excrement, body hair and pubic hair are all subject to intense scrutiny and debate within the online comments on this article (see Valenti, 2015), while the rebellious female body (the excessive, leaking, hairy, un-groomed body of feminist cliché) is promoted as a more authentic embodiment of Woman. This assertion of Woman is nevertheless still a victim of inequality for, as Valenti rhetorically laments: "[w]hen will society accept women's bodies?" (2015). Here, the function of taboo and its relation to desire is eschewed in pursuit of a sexuate equality that does not exist, while, as Lacan puts it, for the hysteric "what is in sexual knowledge is entirely yielded up as foreign to the subject" (2007: 93). That is, the tenor of this debate assumes the structure of the hysteric's discourse that interprets feminine masquerade as an identification point offered by man (the patriarchy, the master, social media) that is rejected – 'no, that's not [Woman]' – while the lack of a universal signifier for Woman is attributed to someone else: it's not my problem, it's society's. Valenti expresses this, for example, by pinning her own and other women's discord to the one who must take responsibility (men), in her claim that "[s]ocial media is protecting men from periods, breast milk and body hair" (2015). Here, the "truth" of the "hysteric's complaint" – her symptom – manifests in an address "to the Other" (Quackelbeen et al., 1994: 134), where the hysteric, "dominated by her question" nevertheless "makes of the master the slave of the work" concerning that question (133).

Consequently, a large part of feminist discourse in digitally mediated communication where it aligns with the hysteric's structure is addressed to the master signifiers occupying S_1 in the top right position in an address that openly

challenges the *status* of S_1 and nominates the hysteric's particular mode of *jouisance* in this social bond. These addresses offer a challenge to the presumed mastery embodied in S_1 – produced through the deconstruction of subjects inhabiting this place: that is, 'the patriarchy', 'white male privilege', and 'toxic masculinity'. Online feminist columnist Ellena Savage succinctly states that, "[p]atriarchy isn't other men: it's you" (2015), because "to a greater or lesser extent" misogynistic behaviour is something "that every male friend of mine has at some point been guilty of" (2015). As such, Savage demonstrates how feminist discourses refuse to be "enthralled" by "master signifiers and systems of knowledge" and respond with a show of "$, the experience of alienation, suppression, exclusion" (Bracher, 1993: 67). This address to patriarchy exposes the enjoyment structured in the hysteric's discourse as it relates to the master, where the hysteric seeks "castration of the idealized father, who yields the master's secret" the flip side of which is an enjoyment in "privation", that is, "the *jouissance* of being deprived" (Lacan, 2007: 99), because the hysteric's discourse is "a matter of knowing … what? Of knowing at what price she herself is this person who speaks" (Lacan, 2007: 34).

Yet this is where the master comes into being as a product of the hysteric's discourse, as a fantasy that there is one subject who is not divided – "so much so" Lacan suggests, "that you have to wonder whether this isn't where the invention of the master began" (2007: 129). For the master's supposed knowledge (of sexual difference) allows the hysteric to cherish (however unconsciously) a belief in Woman. Because if no signifier for Woman exists, how can "equality with regard to the signifier of sexuality" exist (Quackelbeen et al., 1994: 135)? For Quackelbeen et al. (1994: 134), the discursive production of the hysteric "becomes a teaching about the object and the fundamental fantasy". The "unconscious truth" beneath the bar of the hysteric's discourse is a fantasy "that a sexual rapport can exist" (Quackelbeen et al., 1994: 134). Indeed, the fact that "the sexual for a human being is in principle without relation" in no way stops the hysteric from "dreaming of the contrary" that "there is no sexual relation, but *there should be one*" (Quackelbeen et al., 1994: 134; my emphasis).

We can observe this *fantasy* of S_1, where patriarchy stands in for the master that the hysteric creates, in popular second wave feminist theory taken up in digital feminist discourses. Jane Gallop (1982) has noted, for instance, that within some second wave uses of psychoanalysis there is an effort to master the theory explaining woman's privation while the emphasis is on identifying the

master of this theory to castrate because, as Lacan suggests, the hysteric's desire is ultimately for a master who "know[s] lots of things", but not "so much that he does not believe she is the supreme price of all his knowledge" because "she wants a master she can reign over" so that "he does not govern" (Lacan, 2007: 129). The *jouissance* in mobilizing psychoanalysis in this way – enjoyment in the fantasy of a master and in castrating him – manifests in some digital feminist film criticisms that draw on Laura Mulvey's male gaze theory (1989), to reiterate how the structural fantasy of woman-as-object of the gaze in film and screen media secures the masculine subject in his privilege. Feminist blogger film reviews, for instance, often revel in "lambasting" male directors who perpetuate this structural fantasy, and detail (with an intensity of *jouissance*) the actress's embodiment of it (see Leab, 2011), simultaneously exposing the fragility of the master's position while ensuring that Woman – actress or blogger – "is the supreme price."

The hysteric's discourse thus sets a "trap" for the Other (the master) where what signifies in the hysteric's speech (beneath the bar) calls out the Other's impotence (Arenas et al., 1994: 148), which is observable in digital feminist discourses encouraging masters to realize their castration and identify with the hysteric. A blog post in *Scum Mag* entitled, "so your dick isn't perpetually hard" (Muscat 2013), for example, invites men to accept their castration, rather than invest in the fantasy of themselves as masters. But in this, as Bracher suggests, "receivers of the hysterical message are also alienated by being summoned to produce master signifiers and knowledge in response to the other's division ($) rather than in response to their own want-of-being (*a*)" (1993: 68).

The underlying conflict between public ideals and personal (unconscious) desire in the hysteric's discourse effectively (re)emerges in digitally mediated (public) feminist discourses speaking from this position. As Colette Soler observes, as a consequence of feminist ideals sexual difference is "repressed" in efforts towards making public spaces "unisex[ual]", while the hysteric's "question is played out elsewhere, in the closed field of the sexual relationship" where sexual difference "remains irreducible" (2002: 53). That is, the unconscious (personal) mode of the hysteric's discourse regarding the signifier Woman conflicts with the public pursuit of equality at the level of (feminist) ideals because this requires the suppression of sexual difference. Digitally mediated communication makes this schism more immediately problematic because digitally mediated interfaces erode the distinctions between public and private discourses.

5. Making the Personal Political

This conflict between ideals and desires plays out in digital feminist discourses where the pedagogical structure of digital feminisms creates conflicts of difference that result in internal policing over the shared territory of feminist knowledge, because this knowledge production is grounded in the immediacy of the personal. Insofar as the affordances of digitally mediated technologies make personal storytelling more widely available to those without access to commercial media production, digital forms of "storytelling" have been widely credited with "emancipating" under-represented identities (Vivienne, 2016: 3). Equally, the "thorny issue long affecting feminist politics" of internal differences and conflict is, according to Urszula Pruchniewska, overcome through the shareability of information and archive functions that "allow women to work together across their differences" (2016: 739). Yet, where digital feminisms produce a greater volume of content and erode the differences between amateur, professional, scholarly, and celebrity voices they create greater and seemingly more vicious moments of conflict. Indeed, the affordances of this space promote a personal discourse that, where it seeks to be political, is nevertheless not accountable. Susan Greenberg notes, for example, that within debates theorizing digital Web 2.0 discourses, "[t]he perception that personal feelings are 'true' and real because they are unmediated remains a popular and persistent one, and overlaps with the popular understanding of 'authenticity' as trueness to the self" (2001: 166).[3] Within this frame of blogging culture, feminist discourses can more easily slip into hysterical structures that speak in symptom form because much blogging approximates a process of "thinking out loud" that borders on a stream of consciousness (Greenberg, 2011: 157), and is particularly pertinent to the production of truth in the hysteric's discourse.

Where the emphasis on emotion and personal experience constitutes a particular feature of blogging practice, it opens the way for the affective production of the hysteric's discourse to be taken for *truth*. Soler (2016: 61) points out that where language and the signifier intervene into one's being to produce the subject, they come to "define that status of the jouissance" for that speaking being, including the production of affects "that are particular to him" as well as those produced through the socially bonded discursive positions (61) such

[3] As Krüger suggests (2016), documenting one's affective experience is often an implicit requisite of participation in digitally mediated social platforms.

as the hysteric and master. The power of affects, Soler notes, is that they are so immediately felt that they are very "convincing" (2016: 2) to the point that they bring a "hue of reality" in which the subject "recognizes" themselves (105). Nevertheless, affects are not direct signifiers carrying meaning or information; rather, they work through metonymy and displacement, sliding "from representation to representation" and, as such, do not carry "any epistemological value" but designate "[a] false obviousness" (Soler, 2016: 9–11). Because to the one "who is affected, [affects] are plainly obvious", it is easy to "(mis)take" affect as one's "own truth" (Soler, 2016: 105). While critical affect theory examines a wide range of affective states, for Lacan, anxiety – *angoisse* or anguish – is one of the most important affects for the hysteric, because in its signalling of an encounter with the Real (see Lacan, 2014), it can denote "a failure in the field of discourse" (Soler, 2016: 25). This failure of discourse can, I suggest, play a motivating role in the feminist incitement to discourse, which is evident in female traditions of diary-writing.

Where feminist blogging recalls traditional forms of diary-writing particular to women and girls (see Keller, 2016), we can see the ways in which some digital feminist discourses adopt feminism as a signifier that nominates their affective experience. This signifier *legitimates* the subject's affect and seemingly produces a truth about experience. Where digital feminisms provide a "feminist toolkit" for young women (see Keller, 2016; Seidman, 2013: 553; Thelandersson, 2014: 528), for example, they offer a means – a vocabulary and structure – to name and express their experience. The pedagogical and public aspect of this toolkit equates with feminist pedagogy as a "protest [hysterical] pedagogy" that seeks, as Bracher puts it, "recognition" from the other regarding their division as a subject (2006: 96). For instance, in her study of girls' blogging, Jessalynn Keller quotes a young blogger's "coming out" as a feminist: "I want to write about life from my perspective – a feminist teen just trying to make sense of the world – and hopefully appeal to others who feel the same way … – Renee, Sunday June 27, 2010, blog post" (see 2016: 18). Greenberg suggests that "the increasing role of emotion and subjectivity in the public sphere … typically work[s] to connect facts and feelings" and the "manipulation of the reader to respond in a prescribed fashion" (2001: 152–4). As Renee's quote attests, then, "the personal, confessional element found in much feminist teaching and writing" (Bracher, 2006: 96) is a sign of authenticity but one where affect structures

logic. For it is not that drawing on "private emotions" in public spheres is an unstructured discourse but, rather, that forms of "confessional journalism" deliberately "craft" feelings to "communicate" them "in a controlled and deliberate way", so as to "connect those feelings to argument and thought" (Greenberg, 2011: 155–6). The slippage made possible then, when personal affect becomes political discourse, leads to considerable internal conflict in digital feminisms.

5.1. Affective Discourse: Diversity, Conflict, & Policing

An outcome of making the personal political would seem to be distinguished above all else by the conflicts and in-wars between different feminist fractions, built upon different feminist affective knowledge, literature, and pedagogic exchange, all of which is amplified in digitally mediated communication where there are few gatekeepers to the discursive production of feminist knowledge. For instance, Fredrika Thelandersson notes that on Tumblr

> "feminist debates often turn into seemingly never-ending processes of calling out and blaming users for offensive terminology and ignorance of various groups. […] Much of the discussion is based around 'policing' other participants about what they're doing wrong instead of encouraging them for what is being done right." (2014: 528)

Equally, "toxic-twitter wars" between feminist commentators, activists, and scholars tend "to be overtly hostile and insular", reflecting "feminist arguing in general" (Thelandersson, 2014: 527). The hysterical structure of some digital feminist discourses might account for this, in that the hysteric's discourse is a symptomatic demand to the other, the master, who is "called, obliged, summoned to produce the response" (Quackelbeen et al., 1994: 133). When the address is intercepted by another hysteric, however, a problem emerges; as Bracher notes, where feminist discourses are structured as protest (hysterical) discourses, they "can support socially destructive forms of identity politics that pit different groups against each other in a competition for recognition as the greatest victim" (2006: 97). That is, the affective quality of feminist knowledge invites individuals to perceive their own affective truth as the most legitimately and painfully alienating, denoting, as Soler observes, the "dissident" affect of discourse where enjoyment produced in the social bond (such as shared feminist values) can be discordant from the enjoyment "characteristic" of each

individual in their relation to language, their unconscious, and the symptoms and fantasies that follow (2016: 104). Subsequently, "the disparity between one person and another", in terms of the Imaginary, "explains the 'absence of true dialogue' that befalls us despite all our ideals of communication" (Soler, 2016: 104–5).

The intensity of discord in digital feminist discourses might thus be understood to stem, at least in some instances, from the discordance between individual discursive affects where, as Soler puts it, "the other's affects" "seem strange" and sometimes "unbearable" because they conflict with one's own affective truth (2016: 105). The hashtag "#YesAllWomen", is a good example: it seeks to anchor women's collective experiences (Cole, 2015: 356–7) in a social bond but does so in a way that, as with other feminist hashtagging, "assimilates" differences of class, race, and history into "already-circulating discourses" about girls and women (Khoja-Moolji, 2015: 348–9; see, also, Pruchniewska, 2016: 1). The resulting conflicts see feminists hailing other feminists who appear as masters (by contrast), demanding to have their victim status – their painful division as a subject, and refusal of master signifiers – recognized by the other. For a feminist to be "subject to the Other's discourse", then – even that of another feminist – can generate or even reproduce certain affects "such as indignation, protest, anger" (Soler, 2016: 26). Such disparities also elucidate how in some instances *feminist* discourse can appear to other feminists as an external antagonist if not master obfuscating the search for Woman (Quackelbeen et al., 1994: 132).

Consequently, the pedagogical structure of digital feminist discourses – the invitation to identify with alienated subjectivities, the "toolkit" for naming affect and hailing masters – can have damaging effects on both other feminists and the masters addressed. As Bracher suggests, the "inherent danger" of protest pedagogies is that one is asked to identify with the "teacher's desire for a new master signifier" such that one is effectively "coerced" to "identify with someone else's S1" (2006: 97). In this, we see that where digital feminist discourses invite one to participate in the deconstruction and "exposure" of "the deficiencies of the master or the master signifiers", they tend to encourage, the "repression" of one's "own feelings, impulses, or qualities" (Bracher, 2006: 97). The sentiments of the "Women Against Feminism" tumblr denote a resistance to such identification, the tenor of which might be summarized as: 'I don't

necessarily want to be included in claims of (all/current/past) feminisms on the basis that I identify as woman because such claims do not match my affective experience'. The hysteric's cutting down of masters thus includes other women who, in rejecting feminism, identify with feminine masquerade, as well as other *feminists* who, by invoking dissident forms of feminist knowledge, undermine the individual's affective truth, as toxic feminist twitter wars attest.

5.2. The Hysteric's Knowledge: A Revolution in Discourse?

The hysteric's discourse is considered vital to the production of knowledge in the analytic situation as the subject is required to pass through it in analysis to produce "the desire to know" (Lacan, 2007: 34). Yet, though this discourse produces knowledge, it does so beneath the bar. Therefore, though feminist discourses have transformed some aspects of the public and private spheres in the West, these changes do not necessarily satisfy; object *a* – the truth of what motivates, what torments the subject – remains beneath the bar and the hysteric's *product* is largely un-analysed. In addition, because the hysteric's discourse is a desire for an unsatisfied desire, no response from the Other (in either public or private reform) will ever match the enjoyment produced in the hysterical structure (privation). As a result, the hysteric's discourse does not produce a (personal) revolution or transformation of discourse (a positional turn in the matheme) – that occurs through the discourse of the analyst (see Figure 1).[4] Where digital feminist discourses take feminism as an identity bearing signifier, moreover, there is a slippage between the personal and the public/political product of this discourse. The hysteric's (socially bonded) discourse produces knowledge excluded from the symbolic, while in the *private* analytic scenario this knowledge is recognized as that which the hysteric has excluded or not found a way to include in their S_1: object *a*.

Despite this unresolved schism, the discursive product of feminism where it is taken as truth denotes, as Bracher suggests, the production of "a new canon, a new tradition to be taught", which effectively functions as an "authoritarian and establishment pedagogy" (Bracher, 2006: 97). Feminism's knowledge product – published and disseminated through various public institutions such as the university – is now amplified through the critical mass of digital feminisms

[4] Indeed, Soler argues that "psychoanalysis is really what the hysteric needed, because it agrees to recognize the enigma of sex and assumes responsibility for it" (2002: 53).

where it sustains the authority of personal experience. In other words, the industrious product of feminist discourse creates the foundation of a new S2: the discourse of the university.

6. The Discourse of the University: Feminism as S_2 & the Split Subject

What distinguishes the discourse of the university from that of the hysteric is that, where the hysteric's discourse poses a question, the discourse of the university presumes an answer: knowledge. The subject occupying this discourse speaks from a position of authority, invoking knowledge in a way that might be likened to Michel Foucault's theorizing of discourse, where certain utterances are regulated by a field of ideas and practices that "determine" the "conditions of existence" for this utterance (2005: 30). As Renata Salecl puts it, in the discourse of the university "utterances always refer to some field of knowledge; they purport to be justified by proofs and arguments" (1994: 163). In digital feminist discourses, then, we often see the subject *assume* answers via reference to the production of feminist knowledge (S_2) gleaned from feminism's institutionalization and increasing prominence in digitally mediated spaces. The affordances of digital technology allow such knowledge to be appropriated, re/produced, and distributed without, necessarily, going through formal processes of fact-checking or critical evaluation. In terms of sheer numbers, this re/production and distribution of feminist discourses/knowledge is given a symbolic weight. Where it takes on the status of S_2, it is taken as knowledge that gives its speaker *authority*. The "Who Needs Feminism?" tumblr, for example, not only reasserts and produces feminist discourse, but also functions (in part) to school others on feminist knowledge and praxis with an authority grounded in its university setting (see Siedman, 2013: 557). Similarly, Shenila Khoja-Moolji notes that some digitally mediated feminist practices offer a sense of "collectivity" within a knowledge space that presumes a "certainty about the lives of girls" (2015: 348). In effect, digital feminist discourses slip from the hysteric's discourse into the discourse of the university where 'feminism' not only becomes a signifier of identity (a new S_1) from which the subject speaks, but also a signifier that bears the weight of knowledge, S_2, enabling the subject to speak with tacit authority.

The discourse of the university is, in Lacan's schema, largely associated with the discourse of science, which offers the grantee of the big Other formerly held by religion. David Corfield observes that science, in taking the place of God, provides a limit of authority for the subject – one they would willingly cross significant ethical lines for (2002: 196–200) – such that, when the authority of science goes unquestioned it can become equated with or "approach" the "super-egoical effects of the installation of the paternal metaphor" (2002: 199).[5] The problem, as Lacan puts it, is that "the discourse of science leaves no place for man" (2007: 147) – it leaves no place for the subject constituted in language with unconscious fantasies, libidinal drives, or desire. Where feminist knowledge-as-S_2 becomes the ideal-ego of the agent's online identity, the agent of this structure is, according to Lacan's schema, a "split" subject (2007: 104, 148), cut-off from the "subjective truth" of their experience because both S_1 and the divided subject ($) are beneath the bar. For when speaking in the discourse of the university, Bracher notes, one relays "personal history, and reflections on that history" through reference to external "knowledge" that promotes an ideal-ego considered "worthy" of attention from others (1993: 69).

A good example of feminist discourse speaking from the position of S_2 on digitally mediated platforms is Lena Dunham's pronouncements about her experience at the Met Gala across her e-newsletter, Twitter, and Instagram account. On the basis of feminist knowledge Dunham reported that Odell Beckham Jr. (seated at her dinner table) was not interested in talking to her because she failed to embody a form of feminine masquerade or present herself as an object for (his) male gaze (Dunham, 2016, 02 September). In this, Dunham invoked feminist knowledge-as-S_2 to relay a personal experience with the assurance she knew what Beckham was thinking as he looked at her: "Do I want to fuck *it*? Is *it* wearing a … yep, *it's* wearing a tuxedo" (Dunham, 2016, 02 September; my emphasis), positioning herself as an (unworthy) object for the gaze but a worthy subject of feminist discourse. Dunham's subsequent apology further shows us how feminist knowledge-as-S_2 allowed her to be split-off from her own subjective truth. As she put it, she used feminist knowledge as a screen for her personal "insecurities and made totally narcissistic assumptions about

[5] Corfield (2002: 196–200) refers here to Milgram's experiment, where one subject is asked to inflict a lethal electric volt on another in the name of scientific research, comparing it to God's demand that Abraham kill his only son.

what he was thinking, then presented those assumptions as facts" (Dunham, 2016, 04 September).

Dunham's discourse also demonstrates how, where feminism-as-S_2 comes to constitute an onscreen identity that provides super-ego ideals for the subject, it seemingly guarantees a subject that can be exempt from critique. Yet this signifier is unstable, not simply because it leaves the subject in ignorance of their particular enjoyment through which they experience themselves as a subject, but also because the product of the hysteric's discourse is a *symptom*. This slippage perpetuates the symptom in an effort to confront and resolve a phenomenon, for with a new authoritarian pedagogy (pedagogy of the master), one is "inculcated" into the discourse based on the "assumption that the best way to understand a phenomenon or solve a problem is to devote oneself to reading and interpreting the writings of the master" (Bracher, 2006: 88). In addition, Dunham's response illustrates how "knowledge" is "contained in different ways and in different 'layers' within the subject, [such that] it easily produces conflict" (Alcorn, 1994: 41). The hysterical structure, for instance, is the product of an internal conflict between the subject's ideals and their partial drives and unconscious desires. But when the product of this discourse is identified with – as in the case of feminism-as-S_2 – one identifies with a symptom and takes it for truth. As such, though "mastering a field of knowledge" can feel empowering, identifying with knowledge valued for its "social currency" rather than its ability to "solve problems" in the subject's private realm (Bracher, 2006: 91) can result in a restricted relation to self-knowledge and, ultimately, a breakdown in communication.

It is here that challenges to this signifier in the form of other feminist discourses or external trolling can act as a challenge to the subject's stability: an attack on the super-ego ideals that support the on-screen fantasy of the agent's symbolic existence.[6] Indeed, where trolls challenge feminist knowledge, they expose the "dissident affects" in the subject speaking from feminism-as-S_2: the gap between the subject's idiosyncratic mode of enjoyment that may already be in conflict with the super-ego ideals of feminist thought. For where feminism is a product of the hysteric's discourse, 'feminist knowledge' signifies what is inassimilable within the hysteric subject, what remains steadfastly unconscious

[6] This could, perhaps, be likened to the structure of the 'mirror phase' in Lacan's work, where the subject's relation to a specular mirror (in this case screen) image offers a sense of mastery counter to the reality of one's alienated being (for a concise summary of Lacan's mirror phase, see Evans, 1996: 115–116).

in the symptom of the hysteric's speech: sexual difference. Consequently, one can observe the unstable ground the subject occupies when speaking from the discourse of the feminism-as-S_2, and can perhaps explain the quick and often violent – that is, emotionally *affective* – discourse whenever this S_2 is subject to criticism.

6.1. The Enjoyment of the Other

Although not exhaustive of all digital feminist discursive practices, these formulations might explain some of the frustrations felt in forms of digital feminist communication, and I want to finish this paper by briefly considering how the addressee of feminism-as-S_2 is important to the effects of this communicative exchange. In the discourse of the university, the agent addresses object *a*, the vessel to be educated in the knowledge of S_2; however, in digital spheres in particular, the Other is not necessarily acquiescent to this social bond. Bracher notes that we begin life in the position of object *a*, a "yet unassimilated piece of the Real that is an object for the desires of those around us, particularly our parents" (1993: 562) who can be "tyrannical" in their imposing of knowledge values or beliefs on us. In digitally mediated spaces, however, the subject occupying this place would have already assumed an identity in the Symbolic, and would not always be receptive to the knowledge values addressed to them. Put in context, where the address*ee* of those speaking from feminism-as-S_2 questions feminist knowledge discourse – irrespective of motivation – they attack the imaginary solution produced in the hysteric's discourse: the suppression of sexual difference and symbolic castration.

Lacan suggests that the neurotic (in this case, hysteric) assumes that "the Other demands his castration" (Lacan, 2006: 700), such that the neurotic maintains a defence against castration particularly where it might "serve" the *jouissance* of the Other. As the Dunham example suggests, much digital feminist discourse reflects this preoccupation with the Other's enjoyment particularly where the question of sexual difference and feminine masquerade is invoked. The self-portrait by artist Rupi Kaur (2016) in which menstrual blood is visible, for example, protests the image of feminine masquerade in social media that offers enjoyment to the Other, and celebrates her refusal to feed "the ego and pride of misogynist society" (quoted in Valenti, 2015: para. 4–5). Where the agent of digital feminist discourses speaks from S_2 then, they are alienated from

truth in the bottom left position (of themselves as a subject, their division, and desire), such that object *a* appears to belong to the addressed Other. In this, the Other – embodiments of patriarchy, masters, or figures of toxic masculinity – constitute the feminist subject's object *a,* lost, or in this case, seemingly stolen enjoyment. That is, what torments and motivates the subject appears in the enjoyment of the Other. Dunham's comments about Beckham Jr., for instance, are preoccupied with male enjoyment in feminine masquerade, admitting in her apology that "surrounded by models and swan-like actresses it's hard not to feel like a sack of flaming garbage" (Dunham, 2016, 04 September). However humbly phrased here, it is the *imagined* enjoyment of the Other that torments.

The short-circuit from the protest discourse of the hysteric to that of the university is by no-means exclusive to digital feminisms, but where a protest discourse bypasses the analyst, no genuine revolution in their discourse can occur; rather, the short-circuit perpetuates a politics of the symptom *as* a solution. Therefore, where the affordances of digital communications – the immediacy of affective discourse, the relative accessibility and shareability of content – facilitate if not exacerbate the process, digital communication merely contributes to a pre-existing problem. In adopting an ideal-ego built upon another's affective discourse, the subject remains split-off from what motivates them, their desire, and their enjoyment.

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ORIGINAL SCIENTIFIC PAPER

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YouTubers, Online Selves and the Performance Principle: Notes from a Post-Jungian Perspective

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Abstract: *Of the many challenges facing the field of media studies today, the rapid acceleration of the media ecosystem through which people communicate, share and indulge, and seek escape from the tedium of everyday life, presents a set of specific problems. The contemporary media landscape is both an extension and a continuation of more traditional forms and objects for analysis, and also an arena that has, arguably, radically redefined the discipline in terms of the innovations and stark changes to technology, institutions and financial arrangements that have shaped the world of media and communications as we know it. A key area in which post-Jungian approaches are well-placed to accommodate is in the fast-changing field of online media celebrity. The meteoric rise in popularity of YouTube vloggers has given new impetus to the fields of celebrity studies and persona studies – redefining the popular understanding of how celebrity status is sought, conferred, and consumed; and ultimately, transforming how celebrity is defined as a notion. Using critical inquiry as a method, this article discusses mediatised notions of self, persona, and self-commodification from post-Jungian and relational perspectives. The discussion from these theoretical perspectives will open vistas into the critical study of digital, networked media, as well as affording the possibility of an intensification of the critique from psychological and psychoanalytic perspectives on contradictions and tensions present in such contexts.*

Keywords: *celebrity, YouTube, Jung, Marcuse, recognition, performance, self-psychology*

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1. Introduction

On 16th August 2007, a YouTuber calling himself "shaycarl" posted the first of what would become several hundred videos ('Fun with Helium and Passing Out'). Subsequently, during the course of 2008, shaycarl incorporated his family into regular posts. Over time, he also introduced viewers to his family's lifestyle and domestic environment. The SHAYTARDS YouTube channel has an impressive 4.8 million subscribers at the time of writing.[2]

Mirroring the transformation of rock star brands such as Alice Cooper, the public entity ("Shaytard") has become synonymous with an individual person (Shay Carl Butler). This unlikely comparison illustrates the metonymic conflation of public celebrity and private individual that often occurs in celebrity culture: fans and avid YouTube subscribers often refer to Butler simply as "Shaytard", in the same way that fans refer to Vincent Furnier as "Alice Cooper". This practice outlines the continuity in the association of YouTube practices, and celebrity culture in general. It also reflects the psychology of personality in public life. In particular in online contexts, but also in celebrity culture at large, personality is a shorthand for public entities of a kind that embody what is understood in media studies and marketing discourse as 'media property' or 'brand presence', and all of the values associated with those terms.[3]

It is worth noting that, even with his impressive CV, Shay Carl Butler is a virtual outsider in orthodox media studies. However, Lagore (2015) and Lashley (doctoral thesis 2013) both write about the importance of Butler and his work at the intersection of traditional media, television and celebrity studies perspectives. Having researched psychoanalytic studies of various schools, I can find no mention of him or his various enterprises and in fact, at best, the discipline offers wafer-thin coverage of Web 2.0 celebrity culture in general, just as psychoanalytic approaches to celebrity culture in more established, vested media such as television, cinema or publishing have often been found wanting. Where psychoanalytic approaches have attempted to deal with the digital, as

[2] November 2016.

[3] Butler's main YouTube channel, SHAYTARDS carries links to ShayCarl, ShayLoss (a vlog dedicated to Butler's weight loss journey over the course of several years), a dedicated website, as well as all of the major social media platforms; Shay Merch – the website hosting a clothing and merchandise store with connections to Trixin, an apparel range owned by Butler; and Maker Studios, Butler's substantial convergent media production company, originally set up in 2009 and acquired by Disney in 2014 for an amount reported to exceed $500 million dollars in cash, plus options (Spangler, 2014).

Balick (2014a) suggests, all too often "thinking stops".[4] Processes of engagement, co-production and meaning-making in online communication practices are part of the fabric of everyday lives in popular culture, but when thinking continues (rather than stops) one can see clear parallels between these processes, and the processes found in psychoanalysis, as well as various practices of relational and other therapies.

This implies that a meaningful dialogue between media studies and psychoanalytic studies on the interface between celebrity, technology and selfhood in popular culture is long overdue. The aim of this article is to set up such a dialogue in three directions. These directions work through a critical framework of post-Jungian persona (1953) and Winnicott's false self (1956), Aaron Balick's essays of relational psychology in the online world (2014a, 2014b), and Herbert Marcuse's work on the politics of recognition and performance (1955).

The first of these directions intends to map out, for non-specialists, the contemporary media ecosystem as an accelerated, convergent realm of connectivity, particularly in relation to YouTube as *the* popular media platform for celebrity existing today.[5] I indicate salient issues where a post-Jungian perspective can form insights into that ecosystem. The second direction will be to engage the psychology of personality in terms of the way in which consumer-users engage with and mobilise online identity in such accelerated contexts. This will be done through a critical discussion of theoretical frames, including Jung's concept of persona, Winnicott's notion of the false self, and the presentation of the self in interpersonal exchange, applied in Web 2.0 contexts. The third direction I wish to pursue considers how relational processes concerning the negotiation of private and public lives in Web 2.0 contexts function to accommodate the contradictions associated with apparent opposites in play (the opposites re-

[4] As an aside, there is some crucial reflection as to why this happens – psychotherapist Mick Cooper, for example, identifies research that considers various kinds of online therapy, and the kinds of factors that impact upon its effectiveness (2008). One prevalent attitude regarding the effective therapeutic space is the psychotherapy room as a space free of technological impingement; and it is therefore easily understood in this context why psychotherapy in practice often views the social media world with suspicion – as an invasion of psychological space that can get in the way of the healing process. In my view, this is precisely the reason why a collection such as that found in this special issue of CM seems like such a departure from orthodox subject matter for psychoanalytic studies – and is entirely justified as a crucial intervention in the field of digital media phenomena.

[5] According to its own press release for statistics, YouTube has over a billion unique users; and 'every day, people watch hundreds of millions of hours of YouTube videos and generate billions of views.' The streaming service also reaches more 18-34 and 18-49-year-olds than any cable network in the U.S. https://www.youtube.com/yt/press/en-GB/statistics.html [Accessed: 28/10/2016].

ferred to here are experiential distinctions and similarities in online and real-life identity). Here, I draw from Marcuse's notion of performance principle – his attempt to account for the excess materiality associated with politics of recognition, and the need for the human psyche to accommodate this in dialogue with reality and desire. The discussion in these directions will open critical vistas into the study of digital, networked media, as well as affording the possibility of an intensification of the critique from psychological and psychoanalytic perspectives on the contradictions and tensions present in such media contexts.

2. Mapping Problems of an Accelerated Media Ecosystem

Of the many challenges facing media studies today, the rapid acceleration of the media ecosystem through which people communicate and share, and seek escape from everyday life seems to be central (see, for example, Cunningham, Craig & Silver, 2016). This acceleration effect presents a set of specific problems. While the contemporary media ecosystem is both an extension and continuation of more traditional media forms, it has also redefined the discipline of media studies in terms of thinking about how innovations in technology and their relationship with end-user behaviours shape the world of media and communications as we know it. Sherry Turkle (2011) and danah boyd (2012) have both used the term "always-on" to describe a state of persistent, semi-permanent connectivity where being part of a network connected to people and information, wherever and whenever, is assumed. This state has transformed both the character and immediacy of social interactions, and fundamentally, a sense of who I am, and 'where' that 'I' might exist.

This situation precipitates a major concern for media studies scholars who are interested in psychological and humanist approaches to media. My own perspective is shaped by innovations in the field of post-Jungian depth psychology and its potential to provide an understanding of the psychic, unconscious and archetypal processes at work in the production and consumption of culture. Whereas post-Jungian ideas have been applied to a number of arts and humanities fields, perhaps most successfully in film theory and criticism, there are at present still very few post-Jungian or depth-psychological interventions in the field of contemporary digital media cultures. Notable exceptions to this include edited collections (e.g. Weitz, 2014), a special issue of *The Spring Jour-*

nal on the theme of technology, cyberspace and psyche (Winter, 2008), and book-length studies (Balick, 2014b; and Singh (forthcoming).

A key area in which post-Jungian approaches would be well-placed is in the fields of celebrity and persona studies. In particular, the meteoric rise in popularity of YouTube vloggers (such as Zoella, Pewdiepie, Smosh, Caspar Lee, Miranda Sings and shaycarl) has given new impetus to these fields, helping to redefine the popular understanding of how celebrity status is sought, conferred, and consumed; and ultimately, transforming how celebrity is defined (see Biressi & Nunn, 2010; Chen, 2016; Click, Lee & Holladay, 2013; Davis, 2013; Driessens, 2013; Hill, 2014; Jerslev, 2014; Marshall, 2014; Rojek, 2015; Stever, 2011). Whereas a number of formative studies on YouTube, performance and identity have facilitated debates in this area that are largely confined to orthodox media studies concerns (Snickars & Venderau, 2009; Lange, 2014; Burgess & Green, 2009), there are some efforts that focus on emotional and parasocial connections (Walker Rettberg, 2008, 2014; Papacharissi, 2010, 2011; Baym, 2010). Because of its focus on archetypal and archetypical notions of persona, post-Jungian thought can provide an insight into the dynamics of performance of self, and of blurred public and private distinctions in collective psychological encounters. Whereas there are studies on Youtube celebrities, and on YouTube's emotional and relational aspects, there are few psychoanalytic perspectives. Such perspectives might offer something valuable to the understanding of networked media, particularly in its Web 2.0 iteration.

As Jose van Dijck writes, "Between 2000 and 2006, quite a few media theorists claimed that Web 2.0 applications exponentially enhanced the natural human need to connect and create, and they declared early victory for the user" (2013: 10). Such an explicitly utopian discourse on social media empowerment is noticeably less common in the current recuperative climate where increasing and accelerating media concentration has led to the centralisation of a very few massively-influential "siren servers" (Lanier, 2013). Therefore, YouTube, far from being a Web 2.0-optimised 'pull' medium where the "produser" is king (Bruns, 2008), is in some ways significantly aligned with the push mechanisms associated with concentrated, top-down broadcast media forms; and gatekeeping practices more akin to vested interests of capital, than to democratic ideals.

According to Snickars and Vendereau (2009), since Google's acquisition of YouTube in 2006, the discourses associated with the platform have changed

markedly from the championing of entry-level amateur productions of everyday activities to a quest for 'quality' content, with Google ushering in a new era of monetisation as the "no. 1 priority of 2009" (YouTube Fact Sheet, cited in Snickars & Vendereau, 2009: 10). Of course, there is still no shortage of cat videos and badly-framed clips of cute babies on the platform. However, in the context of 2016, you are as likely to get this kind of content from an already-known celebrity as you are from a member of the general public; and alongside professionally produced content (that is sometimes feature length, rather than mere clips), often on the same channel.

However, this tension between the Web 2.0 ethos of inclusion and the quest for better content as a "no. 1 priority" merely refers to front-end, 'plug-in-and-play' consumer experiences. The back-end of these convergent media services – which are made up of massive amounts of personal data, held in datasets, which are almost exclusively of a proprietary nature and ultimately unusable in the hands of the ordinary end-user – ensures that the average consumer has very little knowledge of these processes, let alone has access to that data in a readable and usable form (Zelenkauskaite, 2016). This amounts to a systematized abnegation of users' ownership of their own personal information and, on the part of the platform, is a systematically and structurally disempowering institutional arrangement. It is reasonable to assume that the average consumer would have little interest in pursuing such access: even with a basic awareness of such arrangements of information flow, consumers of such convergent media forms are satisfied[6] with the trade-off of personal data for goods and services (Markos, Labrecque & Milne, 2012). Furthermore, there are an increasing number of studies that seek to deal with the aftereffects on users' habits and attitudes towards convergent Web interaction (Fuchs, 2012, 2014; Fuchs et al., 2014; Meikle & Young, 2012; Hogan, 2010).

From these perspectives, *the individual as such has become part of the content being produced*. Purpose-built algorithms designed to draw out data to increase the efficiencies of reach and identify safe areas for investment only serve to accelerate this direction of movement. In essence, the ordinary user is the product. Content, in this sense, can be taken as front-end social media profile and browser/click-through patterns, through mid-points of consumer profiling, to

[6] At least, satisfied in the instrumental sense of receiving gratis access to key mass communications platforms, subject to accepting terms and conditions.

back-end data production. In this way, contemporary media interaction has taken on (to borrow from classic Marxian terminology) the *appearance-form* of consumer-as-agent, which sublates a deeper, atomised version of consumer-as-commodity, and tends to reduce the character of customer satisfaction to the choice of trade-off: access to media services for a surrender of data. This is, essentially, an estranged relationship with a set of popular practices and activities to which users generally devote considerable amounts of their time.[7] It renders more holistic notions of labour, and indeed subjectivity, as unfit for purpose (the 'purpose' here being bottom-line leveraging of surplus value), unless such labour and subjectivity can be wholly quantified.

3. Self-Presentation and the Public-Private: Relational Perspectives

This process of the commodification of users has been the subject of scholarly attention, as outlined. However, the related-but-separate notion of self-commodification, where users self-identify publicly with specific lifestyle choices, and document these extensively on platforms such as YouTube or in connected social media, is more immediately relevant in the context of celebrity YouTubers and their followers. For example, documenting one's FitBit data or an Instagram of one's healthy breakfast, or vlogging about one's experience of a fitness challenge are commonplace. This self-disclosure practice is also illustrated when consumer-users post links to personal lifestyle material via the comments section on a celebrity's YouTube channel. This expresses, in a public space, a parasocial commonality with that celebrity. Whereas distinct public and private spaces do exist today, and are valued according to their own qualities, there is also something new in the conceptual sense where public and private distinctions are no longer upheld as conventions of social relationships, and intimacy is signified through a kind of public-private interchangeability on social media platforms. In this latter scenario, we are dealing with worldviews aligned to everyday mediatised experiences, negotiated through a sort of consent within the relations of labour, consumption and exchange outlined above, and shaped through values associated with celebritization (Driessens, 2012, 2013).

[7] Krüger & Johanssen (2014) discuss this at length in relation to alienation and digital labour.

Far from being a purely technological phenomenon in the conventional sense, these issues are fundamentally tied to notions of identity and presentations of self in everyday life. However, these notions are amplified exponentially in the context of interpersonal communications via YouTube and other Web 2.0 platforms that facilitate self-commodification through extensive online documentation. This amplification reveals contradictions running through the heart of YouTube as a platform for identity mobilisation, as seemingly opposite notions of public and private are suspended, as are other seemingly dichotomous elements such as the ordinary on the one hand, and the extraordinary on the other.

Such tensions between public and private, ordinary and extraordinary, are especially interesting in terms of YouTube celebrity because its effectiveness often relies upon striking a balance between extremes. It emphasises at specific moments one over the other, but more often than not extremes are held in a delicate suspension. A basic requirement of vlogging is that it presents for the viewer an ordinary person who can be related to on some personal level, at least in the first few posts before the vlogger is established as a 'personality'. Conventions often include being framed in a talking-head shot, in an everyday setting, making observations about the quotidian and being relatable to the audience.

This was the case with Shay Carl Butler. His pronounced physical transformation over time via a very public weight-loss challenge was matched by heavily self-publicised changing family arrangements. New members of his family were born into his publicly-viewable lifestyle, and alongside Butler's own vlogging professionalization, his family members became professional vloggers too. The contradictions of celebrity and everyday were also reflected in the choice of environments within which the vlogs were produced – from conventional talking-heads posts to shopping trips in Times Square, and even more tellingly, a vlog posted from a media industry award ceremony to which his whole family was invited. The change in presentation (if not production values, which remain resolutely DIY for the majority of his posts) reflects the mediatized journey that shaycarl has undertaken since 2007. The contradictory elements suspended in this celebrity-driven media ecosystem are intertwined spectacle and everyday life, and public and private identities.

For Luke Hockley (2014), this "flowing together" of public and private aspects of our identities, and the way we come to regard ourselves and others,

allows a psychological space of consideration for the messy, lived complexity of social phenomena. I would take this further in suggesting that, in contemporary image-driven culture, and within the persistent connectivity associated with the always-on, the way that humans as intersubjective beings tend to engage in their dealings with one another amplifies this complexity. This lived complexity is as important for spaces of imagination as it is for social spaces of communication, and by extension, the co-produced relationships between individuals and groups in the social and imaginal realms. In the context of cinema and cinema cultures, for example, Hockley (2014: 35) states that:

> "Jung used the term *enantiodromia* […] to suggest that opposites, far from pulling in different directions, in fact turn out to run into each other. When seen in this light it is apparent that the cinema is both a place of psychological encounter yet equally provides a safe space for this encounter to happen."

He writes that this pulling together of seemingly contradictory terms is essential to engage the role of culture in determining the expression of collective psychological encounters: "[…] in keeping with post-Jungian theory, which aims not to establish a lack (as in Freudian and particularly Lacanian theory) but rather to find a productive tension in bringing what might appear to be opposites together" (Hockley, 2007: 14).

Perhaps the most productive tension in the context of YouTube personalities and celebrity cultures is the blurred distinction between public and private in the identification, construction and mobilisation of the self. The immediacy and sheer speed of exchange, amplified through emotionally-charged celebrity culture, and engaged with by consumers of popular culture who are not only fans (and anti-fans, haters) of the celebrity figures themselves, means that consumer-users tend to be adept with the discourses featured in the communicative practices of platforms. Things tend to escalate very quickly under such intense circumstances. The GamerGate phenomenon illustrated this tendency with alarming results.

GamerGate started out as a Twitter hashtag response to a viral blog post, uploaded by software developer Erin Gjoni in August 2014. In the post (known colloquially as 'The Zoe Post', and widely distributed on several online sites and chat forums, including 4chan) Gjoni detailed his relationship with ex-partner Zoe Quinn, an independent game designer. Subsequent commentary and re-

sponses from readers of this blog, mainly from the crossover of gaming culture and 'Men's Rights Activism', led to allegations that Quinn had given a games journalist sexual favours in exchange for a favourable review of her free-to-play game, *Depression Quest* (Poland, 2016; Stuart, 2014; Kolhatkar, 2014). It later transpired that the critic had never reviewed the game, but the train of events spiralled out into widespread death and rape threats on several social media and chat sites, doxxing (the publication of personal data of Quinn and members of her family) and even the release of nude pictures of Quinn on so-called 'revenge porn' websites (Busch, Chee & Harvey, 2016). As Keith Stuart (2014) reported in the *Guardian* at the time:

> "[…] proponents of this movement say their key target is games journalism. Gamergate complains about cronyism between certain writers and developers […]. The undercurrent, however, has always been darkly misogynistic. The victims of Gamergate's ire have mostly been female developers, academics and writers."

Although it has largely disappeared from popular cultural view, GamerGate has remained more than a mere Twitter hashtag. For Shaw and Chess (2016) it is a constellation of website activities – across Tumblr, redditt, the 4chan and 8chan forums, the subject of memes, and also of crucial importance to its longevity, a persistent presence across several YouTube channels. The voracity, extremity and self-belief, for example, that Gamergaters have displayed in their dedication to discrediting female videogame developers, critics and commentators is deeply troubling in its aggression (MacCallum-Stewart, 2014; Poland, 2016). Well-known examples of this practice of trolling-as-a-lifestyle goal include the relentless attacks upon 'Tropes vs. Women in Video Games' Youtuber and 'Feminist Frequency' vlogger, Anita Sarkeesian (Kolhatkar, 2014; Chess & Shaw 2015). Indeed 'Men's Rights Activist' YouTubers such as NateTalksToYou, Thunderf00t, and dozens of others have devoted entire YouTube series to discrediting her work; comments on their posts often appear to endorse crossing multiple social boundaries to attack Sarkeesian on a personal level, punctuated with sexually violent language towards her or her family (Poland, 2016).

The position of Sarkeesian as a public intellectual rests upon her professionalized use of Web 2.0 technologies to pursue and leverage audience reach. Her success is such that demands for content have seen Sarkeesian crowdfunding future work through Kickstarter campaigns. This itself has led to criticisms of

her work ranging from drifting away from her video essay DIY roots, to criticisms of her using fans' money for her own private gain (Kolhatkar, 2014). At this purely technical level, Sarkeesian cannot win: her opponents use the same productions conventions as weapons to undermine her position. At another level, the professionalized nature of her opposite numbers is in itself astonishing. Using the same levers and monetisation tactics as those attacked, these YouTubers have established norms in harnessing parasocial mechanisms of both identification and alienation to facilitate parallel careers.

They present as 'reality' – the logic of such right-wing critics relies on an appeal to facts, logic and 'keeping things real' to succeed. But even at a superficial level, the levels of constructed self-presentation enacted by both bloggers and commenters are similar. Sarkeesian, for example, presents as a public intellectual and critic. Her critics, when forming full critiques of her work, tend to use similar presentation techniques and conventions to present their cases. In the Sarkeesian case, as in other right-wing YouTuber cases, this even produces instances where fan videos are made in tribute to critics (e.g. dedicated to NateTalksToYou) of so-called 'Social Justice Warriors'. The point here is that the escalation into what can only be described as hate-filled practices on free speech platforms, ironically predicated on a perceived need to shut someone down, is sped up through the capabilities of the platform itself, and through appropriation of similar conventions to those used by the targets.

The parasocial involves the application of unsaid protocols informing appropriate behaviours and responses in such contexts. In the case of a YouTuber's interaction with users, this is a one-way system in the first instance, particularly in such massively popular cases as Shay Carl Butler. However, the public and private distinction is not merely a matter of deception: it is an everyday description of an interplay between a number of levels operating within social encounters. Firstly, a number of conventions are invoked through a setting, for example, affordances of the medium, comment-enabled exchanges; generic codes and conventions associated with the content of the posted videos; and discourse associated with the short forms of communication held to be standard in comments posted on YouTube, and the emotional discourses associated with celebrity more generally (aspiration, admiration, infatuation etc.). Secondly, through what might be described as a *proxemics* of YouTube, social psychology approaches serve to illustrate the added complexities of social context

cues, the level of communication fidelity, non-verbal communications clarity, the absence of eye-contact in non-visual communications forms, and so on (e.g. Sproull & Kiesler, 1986; Joinson, 2003). Thirdly, levels of trust and anxiety management (Gudykunst, 1995) are made more complicated through the character of emotional investment associated with fannish devotion to particular YouTube personalities. Finally, from a post-Jungian perspective, impression management might be described as a normal, 'everyday pathology' regarding this misrepresentation.

In this sense we might consider the intersubjective dimensions of interpersonal encounters and the presentation of a 'version' of oneself – phenomena described by post-Jungian and relational schools as the presentation of a mask or false-self of some kind.

4. Jung's Concept of Persona

When Jung (1953; 1921/1998) described the notion of persona, he referred to it as a psychological archetype of social adaptation. This persona is not 'false' in quite the same way as a 'fake', or as an inauthentic or imaginary construct, or as a vehicle for intentional deceit.[8] The main point in classic Jung is the emphasis on the dangers of over-identifying with one's persona. He saw this as coming at the expense of deep self-development in the sense of an unconscious process. He also saw this in terms of the labels that are given us by others in social situations – labels that 'stick', and are internalised. It is not so much the misrepresentation that is problematic here, but the proclivity for human subjects to fully identify with the misrepresentations involved. Crucial to fully understanding the presentation of self, therefore, is the acknowledgement of the role of persona (the aforementioned 'mask' or 'false-self') in such contexts.

The key schools of thought in relation to persona and false self are the post-Jungian and relational traditions associated with Winnicott (1956). For Aaron Balick (2014b), the Jungian persona and the relational false self are expressions of ego functions, because "they both lie between internal experience (intrapsychic) and the outside world (intersubjective); hence, they can both be conceived

[8] Although, it is perhaps worth noting that deception might be thought of in the sense of a conceptual category related to aspects of all of these descriptions insofar as the archetype existing as part of the self's psychological defences against both the degradation of the continuity of self, and social ineptitude.

as 'relational' because they develop for the purpose of managing the space between self and other" (2014b: 16).

Jung's own description of persona also reveals and emphasises the relational aspects of this function. For Jung (1998: 99, my emphasis), the persona is a

> "[…] functional complex that comes into existence for reasons of adaptation or personal convenience, but is by no means identical with the individuality. The persona is exclusively concerned with the relation to *objects*. The relation of the individual to the object must be sharply distinguished from the relation to the subject."

This concern with objects is key to understanding the Jungian dilemma of persona. In the first instance, the essence of persona is relational, in that it forms an interface in the way people communicate and socialise. It enables the functioning of interpersonal protocol in social settings. In this model of self-presentation an individual can present to others a version of themselves they deem appropriate to the given situation. However, the Jungian model emphasises the unconscious, psychic function of this 'versioning' process – vital for the health of ordinary social relations and the psychic wellbeing of the individual. This is because it is an ongoing process, occurring alongside and supporting every social interaction within which we participate. It is at least the function (if not exactly the same form) of what Winnicott (1956) described as a 'false self'. He wrote (1956: 387) that

> "This false self is in no doubt an aspect of the true self. It hides and protects it, and it reacts to the adaptation failures and develops a pattern corresponding to the pattern of environmental failure. In this way the true self is not involved in reacting, and so preserves a continuity of being."

Jung made similar observations when he wrote that, as the social face an individual presents to the world, persona is a complicated system of relations; "[…] a kind of mask, designed on the one hand to make a definite impression on others, and on the other to conceal the true nature of the individual" (1953: 190).

Therefore, one may see similarities between Jung's notion of persona and Winnicott's false self, where the hidden character of the encounter with selves is elaborated. Not foregrounded, but made apparent, through a comparison of these descriptions in both lines of thought is a discernible *enantiodromic*

running-together of an impression-intention and a concealment-intention. It is true that concealment has negative connotations associated with deception and acts of anti-social behaviour. However, concealment also provides for a hiding, a protection, which, although present in Jung's notion of persona, is made much more explicit in Winnicott's notion of false self. Both systems attempt to account for the dialogical complexity of interpersonal presentation and impression management in social contexts, and Balick's work draws from the relational aspects of both to create a three-dimensional sense of how these encounters work in online social communications.

For Balick, persona is suited to the individual: even as it distorts the view of the true self for others, it is never fully a false self that is presented. In this sense, both Jung's and Winnicott's systems account for a relation to a partial accuracy. Therefore, the term 'false' is not intended to signify 'inauthentic'. Inauthenticity ought to be reserved for cases where the individual identifies with the false self as if that is all there were. For Balick, "Pathology develops only when the individual identifies with their persona at the expense of other attributes of their personality: when they believe the persona to be 'the whole thing'" (2014b: 16).

It is not a straightforward matter to reconcile conceptualisations of persona and false self as being the same in terms of form. Winnicott's false self is very much an aspect of self that one might relate to the notion of *identity*, whereas Jung's persona needs to be considered as a more fundamental adaptation *archetype*. Therefore, while it is fair to say that they are not the same, I would argue that they are related nonetheless.[9]

This matter leads us to the second instance in Jung, and his concern with *objects* specifically. Where there is over-identification of an individual with their persona, as can happen in the everyday psychology of personality, this misrecognition has implications for the differentiation in consciousness between individual and person, which Jung took pains to distinguish in his essay on *Psychological Types* (1971). In human interactions, healthy personae are characterised by both robustness and strong differentiation. However, social media

[9] Some schools of relational thought, particularly Kohut's self-psychology (1977, and elsewhere), and Jacoby's reading of Kohut and Jung (2006) articulate the similarities and differences in these two conceptions with remarkable clarity, using relational terminology to describe the articulation of self and identity. I have little space to dedicate to this matter here. However, it is worth stating the value of Kohut's work in this regard as an under-explored area for developing a robust theoretical framework for online identity. I discuss his work in more detail elsewhere (Singh, forthcoming). I ought to acknowledge a debt of gratitude here to Luke Hockley, who introduced me to Kohut's work some time ago.

communications have an in-built tendency for communication shorthand, and this tendency systematically favours the personally convenient, and the immediacy of identification with persona as a quick-response, 'easy version' of the self. On this basis, assumed versions of oneself and others have a tendency to become *estranged*; and relations become *objectified*. This bears out in Lupton's work on the quantified self (2016), which considers the layers of objectification and profiling in self-tracking processes – ultimately governed through routines of data automation, rather than necessarily through user agency. Self, in this sense, is systemic and simulated, rather than expressed in any strong sense by the user; and these routines are the governing principle at the data level in all social media platforms, YouTube included.

The function of persona as social interface is a description of relational aspects of interpersonal communication, and also has an intrapsychic function. As Balick notes: "Both the [Winnicott model of] false self and [Jungian] persona function in an outside-facing way by utilising the *reality principle* to prevent id-oriented aims" (2014b: 16 [my emphasis]). Here Balick overtly uses Freudian terminology to articulate tensions inherent in the self-identity dynamic, where the self is partially founded upon basic drives – something Jungian psychotherapists sometimes refer to as 'affectivity'.[10] However, there are further questions to be addressed regarding how these intrapsychic processes are transformed in routines of a commodified-self. For example, how does this self become sublated by relations between individuals and personae to appease the needs of what might be described as a *performance principle*?

Balick makes a similar argument largely in the context of identity expression though front-end profile information (status updates, field form information in comments, etc.). However, a thicker description is possible regarding the nature of this identification at the data level – where the extent of consumer-user agency is curtailed even further by regimes of automation and filtering that go largely unchecked and are invisible to users. Not only is there a danger that users will identify with the presentation on social media as the whole thing, but social media itself, through its algorithms and filtering mechanisms, *identifies the profiled user as the whole thing*. Innovations such as semantic media and artificial intelligence may be ingenious, but they do not and cannot constitute human consciousness as a recognising presence in the same sense.

[10] For example, C.T. Stewart refers to affectivity as the "primary motivation system in humans, the energy behind all agency", expressed as "innate affects" (2008: 5).

5. YouTube Celebrity, Reality Programming and the 'Performance Principle'

In this light, I contend that the commodified self, addressed through routines of automation (such as targeted advertising, suggested links, recommendations and so on) experiences an estrangement from the world of the social at the level of data profiling. There are a number of precedents outlining this direction of argument (e.g. Krüger & Johanssen, 2014; Andrejevic, 2011), particularly in relation to affectivity. From my perspective, data profiling as a practice and process actively encourages the Jungian pathology of persona identification; in classical terminology, this automated commodification of identity comes at the expense of the 'soul' or psyche of the consumer. In a less poetic description it is an affront to the notion of agency in an everyday sense and runs counter to assertions that participation in social media can lead to strong freedoms of expression.

This is also the case at the more front-end level of online interpersonal encounters, where the performed version of the self is the version presented to, and acknowledged by, the other, in mutual exchange. There is a doubling effect to the character of this estrangement where the individual over-identifies with the false-self presented in interaction with other false-selves. In this way, doubling occurs in an amplifying circle of estranged social relations and recognition politics. This is a kind of compliance towards the state of affairs inherent in the system, in which the compliant self carries with it the very real danger of potential for misrecognition by individuals, groups and society as representative of the whole thing.

The important issue is not so much the fact that people have a false self or persona, but that SNSs are geared towards emphasising these aspects of intentionality and agency over and above others. Whereas Jung and Winnicott account in different ways for the problems associated with over identifying with persona and the false self, the converse is also true. We see this in the disinhibited behaviours of fans commenting on their favourite YouTube videos, where they open themselves up to the extent that they become vulnerable to uncaring, toxic responses.[11] Ultimately, this points to another dialectic – in relation to performed intimacies and public shows of affection in fans' comments towards

[11] Such practices of self-disclosure are the subject of a range of scholarly approaches to social media behaviours (boyd, 2014; boyd & Donath, 2004; Baym, 2010; Papacharissi, 2010; Walker Rettberg, 2008 and 2014), and so I will

their YouTube celebrities. The nature of this parasocial performance is connected to the maintenance of a specific impression that adheres to conventions of public presentation. This points again to the tension between authentic and inauthentic, where distinctions between the private self and public persona are marked by a perceived authenticity of the former, and a relative inauthenticity of the latter. Erving Goffman, whose work is influential in the field of social media studies, writes (1997: 22–23 [Lemert and Branaman eds.]) that

> "In their capacity as performers, individuals will be concerned with maintaining the impression that they are living up to the many standards by which they and their products are judged. […] But, qua performers, individuals are concerned not with the moral issue of realizing these standards, but with the amoral issue of engineering a convincing impression that these standards are being realized."

There is a standardization or convention of behaviours, emphasising the version of the self as performed to be the specific object intended for the other party's attention, rather than standards in any moral sense. It has been pointed out (e.g. by Athique, 2013) that this might in itself lead to a superficial or diminished interpersonal exchange, because of Goffman's implication that there is an 'original' self, lying at the heart of personality – the performed version is something quite apart. However, this does not fully engage the reciprocal intrapsychic nature of the versioning process as maintaining an accommodation of inner and external worlds (within the social imaginary), and the space that Goffman himself gives over to this reciprocation. Goffman goes on to state that, "At one extreme, one finds that the performer can be fully taken in by his own act; he can be sincerely convinced that the impression of reality that he stages is the real reality" (1997: 95). This is, of course, an internalisation, of the performed version of the self as 'the whole thing' – the very phenomenon that both Jung and Winnicott guard against. The immediacy and semi-permanence of the contemporary media ecosystem not only affords such practices, but actively rewards them.

This is found especially in practices of celebrity YouTubers themselves, whose success often depends upon the creation of strong and stable mythologies about their own personal journeys – an interaction standard as much as a

not explore them in too much detail here, except to observe the relatively obvious and underexplored avenues for considering public displays of intimacy and disclosure from a post-Jungian perspective on the false self and persona.

skilled narrative – to build fan viewership over the course of several videos. In some cases, this journey can take years. It involves a performed, explicitly stated conviction that one is on a journey; and this conviction in turn encourages end-users to invest emotionally in the notion that they are sharing that journey – a telos embodied by the metaphor of a journey. In a protracted series of vlogs over the course of several years, shaycarl gives his weight-loss 'journey' extensive coverage. These materials detail Butler's reflective experience of starting out, gaining conviction and a sense of mission, achieving goals, overcoming stumbling blocks and so forth. The conviction with which Butler dedicates himself to bodily transformation is concomitant with his steady rise to fame. The corporate "mission" to which he applies his efforts is both well-documented, and received with enthusiasm amongst his fans. The more they engage with his work, the more his fans are rewarded with further content. This might be said to be the case for much of the transmedial content produced in the contemporary media ecosystem, which is, by a general rule of thumb, reliant upon the convergence of media platforms and the synergy involved at the level of industrial and corporate convergence (Jenkins, 2006; Jenkins, Ito & boyd, 2015). However, in the context of YouTube's specific role in Maker Studios' output, these interactions mask, at barely a hair's breadth, the underlying secondary effects of this journey – that all of the activity generates phenomenal amounts of data about end-users, which is quantified into information, and is convertible into surplus value of specific interest to YouTube as a corporate platform, and therefore Maker Studios' business model.

There are other kinds of performances in celebrity YouTuber activities. Some are more discernibly theatrical and performative to the user-consumer than the kinds of performances that are constructed as 'real' (I refer to the Shaytards here as a typical example of the latter). In such cases the performances are presented as deliberate, and often, deliberately awful. The synthetic nature of this may be summarised as parody or at the very least, a playful interaction with the conventions and values associated with the platform, and the end-user is both fully aware of the levels of performativity, and the direction in which the joke is aimed.

A clear example of this kind of performance can be found in the work of another popular YouTuber, Miranda Sings (played by Colleen Evans). The function of Miranda's performance is not to deceive the audience, but to play

on conventions of reality programming forms. Miranda's shtick is to perform popular songs, in an act where she is convinced of her popularity due to being such a likeable YouTuber (she is purposively neurotic, over-sensitive, irritable and generally unlikeable) and a pop star in the making (her renditions are deliberately awful). In this case, the target of the parody is both the concept of YouTube celebrity itself, and the presentational form through which standards impress their meaning through gesture, iconography, and generic convention. In this sense, then, Miranda's persona is much more playfully in tune with formal aspects of drag performance, and certainly operates at a level of campness that is both knowing, and excessive. Evans has her own YouTube channel (PsychoSoprano),[12] has produced vlogs specifically addressing the artifice embedded in the Miranda performance e.g. make-up tutorials on how to emulate Miranda's look ('Becoming Miranda Sings!' published Feb 22, 2013) and often breaks the illusory authenticity of Miranda through appearing simultaneously as both herself and Miranda, using split-screen technology.[13]

We may think about the nature of Evans' performance in a number of ways, operating at different levels in terms of interacting with the platform itself (YouTuber performance, end-user performance in comments etc.). However, one might begin to take this interaction further, by considering Herbert Marcuse's notion of performance principle. This idea moves criticism towards the implications of how the technical mechanics of practices found in the interactions of presentation, misrepresentation, quantified profiling and emotional investment in YouTube engagements interact at the level of the psychological. His approach lends itself to a political economic trajectory of the psychological projects that find root in both Jung and Freud. The performance principle, according to Marcuse, is the "prevailing form of the reality principle" (1955: 35) and can therefore be said to characterise a development of Freud's original concept, which dates back to his "Formulations Regarding the Two Principles of Mental Functioning" essay (1911), itself claimed by Vannoy Adams (2004: 1–2) to be a development of Jung's work, "Concerning Two Kinds of Thinking" (also 1911).

It is intriguing to think about Marcuse's work in relation to firstly, the performativity of social media interactions within routines of data automation and

[12] As of October 2016, Miranda has featured in her new Netflix Originals series 'Haters Back Off'.

[13] For example, 'Miranda and Colleen Q+A', posted Feb 10, 2015; and 'Miranda and Colleen sing together!' posted Jan 31, 2013.

governance (i.e. a quantified self) and secondly, the performance of self at the level of subjective encounter (i.e. YouTube 'personalities'). The way Marcuse describes his notion of performance principle could have been written with these two factors in mind. He is worth quoting in full (1955: 45) here:

> "The performance principle [...] presupposes a long development during which domination has been increasingly rationalized: control over social labor now reproduces society on a large scale and under improving conditions. For a long way, the interests of domination and the interests of the whole coincide: the profitable utilization of the productive apparatus fulfils the needs and faculties of individuals. For the vast majority of the population, the scope and mode of satisfaction are determined by their own labor; but their labor is work for an apparatus which they do not control, which operates as an independent power to which individuals must submit if they want to live. And it becomes the more alien the more specialized the division of labor becomes. Men do not live their own lives but perform pre-established functions. While they work, they do not fulfil their own needs and faculties but work in *alienation*."

As with most Marxian approaches, work in the sense that it is necessary to subsist is superseded here by a kind of work that is surplus to that need – the digital labour of social media users, who produce monetised data sold at a remove to third parties. Simultaneously, such labour is performed in relation to another kind of work – the labour of YouTube personalities and their public relations teams, in co-ordinating the production of content and enriched pathways to merchandising and third party sites and other revenue strategies. Ironically, although the industrialized nature of this activity may be classed as another kind of surplus work because of its inherent estrangement from the products of individuals' labour, it is also *performed*, in the sense that it serves the purpose of professionalized activity for the individual 'personalities' involved.

The distinction Marcuse implies between work that is needed for one's satisfaction and work that is needed for the apparatus happens to coincide, fulfilling the career needs of the YouTuber, and the profit needs of industrial sponsors, of various descriptions. However, the instrumentalized relations through which the YouTuber-as-a-worker tends to, and supports, the needs of the apparatus involved (a content platform to generate user-interest for the purpose of monetising their data) is doubly estranged when bringing the status of the other

YouTube worker (the end-user) as a *product* into the equation. If YouTubers themselves are conforming to the needs of the apparatus through content production and the performance of conventions associated with professional vlogging, YouTube end-users are also conforming to their own assigned roles as commodified objects. When applied to this relationship in social media relations of production-consumption, one can see how the notion of performance principle can help describe how desire is manipulated to establish what Marcuse (1964) described as one-dimensionality – the one-dimensionality of a commodified self, or a false self, or, in the over-identification with persona as the whole thing. The parasocial aspects of relationships formed in social media contexts alone give rise to aspects of desire-fulfilment that are necessary as a step (one among many) towards that instrumentality.

6. Conclusion

The extremes of performance of self that Goffman suggests are in some ways deconstructed by the playful conventions of vlogging, such that whereas no-one in particular is deceived by a performed act or character, we are also as audiences no longer required to hold such performances in cynicism. Networks on YouTube become more like nebulae in that the apparatus through which to read performances becomes ever more subtle and nuanced, just as the performances themselves become more standardized and conventional over time.

In the final analysis, there are a number of political questions that need to be addressed further. Political economy critique of the role of data profiling in relation to the quantifying and commodification of selves in social media contexts has established itself in media studies (e.g. Dyer-Witheford, 1999, 2010; Allmer, 2015). Parasocial approaches to social media interaction are also emerging as key themes for critical theory to develop (e.g. Bocarnea & Brown, 2007; Click, Lee & Holladay, 2013; Stever, 2011). Theories of parasocial phenomena, and the emotional investment built through such interpersonal relationships with unknown and unknowable public personalities, tend not to feature in political economy approaches and vice versa; and therefore neither paradigm alone adequately foregrounds the social imaginary of connectivity within platforms such as YouTube, as a rich psychosocial space for critical inquiry and further exploration.

Data profiling as a process actively encourages what Jungian perspectives consider the pathology of persona identification; and in classical Jungian terminology, data profiling comes at the expense of the 'soul' or psyche of the consumer. There is a sense in which this description holds true in its poetic, experiential sense. The trade-off argument in Web 2.0 discourse (goods and services are gratis, with the proviso that end-users give up certain rights to control data associated with their activities, movements, opinions, meaning, and even world-views) very rarely goes so far, except perhaps in circumstances where critics take more polemical stances towards the status quo. Although there is a danger here of reproducing the notion of an authentic/inauthentic binary, what is needed, perhaps, is a holistic, *enantiodromic* approach to the notion of what might constitute an inauthentic self, particularly in response to the need for a more dynamic and dialectical consideration of self and identity relations in online interpersonal communications.

In terms of a politics of recognition and the commodification of identity mobilisation in online communications, there is a question concerning the practices of 'versioning' that YouTube practices seem to lay bare, as a goal-oriented performance towards quantified status – and the professionalization of such performative practices. The character of professionalization of vloggers primarily working on YouTube[14] reflects the wider cultural shift in Web 2.0 from creating and expressing as aspects of democratised communicative practice, to the monetising and industrial recuperation of technologies and practices as ends in themselves. This much has been commented upon and critiqued by various segments of the political spectrum (Jenkins, Ito & boyd, 2016; Lovink 2011, 2016; Dyer-Witheford, 1999, 2010; van Dijck, 2013). What I hope to have outlined in this article are three directions of the performance of online selves that may be explored further, and in turn, for which post-Jungian and relational schools of thought might shed further light.

[14] Zoella, Sprinkleofglitter and other big-name celebrity vloggers in the field of fashion, lifestyle and cosmetics are perhaps typical here.

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A Digital Death Drive? Hubris and Learning in Psychoanalysis and Cybernetics

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Abstract: *This paper offers a critique of the fetishisation of 'the digital' in Western culture by bringing together Freudian and Marcusian psychoanalytic theory with Gregory Bateson's cybernetics. In particular, it correlates the cybernetic concepts of analog and digital information with the psychoanalytic conceptual pair of Eros and Thanatos. The psychoanalytic concept of the 'death drive' appears through the cybernetic lens as a fetishistic tendency towards freezing or regressing to lower levels of complexity and sensitivity of learning. With the help of Marcuse and Bateson, I understand the contemporary prevalence of a 'digital death drive' as an inhibition of learning in terms of the nature of the digital and its severing from the analog context. By contrast, by reading Marcuse's concept of Eros as having multiple logical levels (Eros$_{1,2,3}$) in the cybernetic sense and by comparing these levels with Bateson's multiple logical levels of learning (Learning$_{1,2,3}$), we come to see Marcusean 'erotic liberation' or 'revolutionary love' not as resulting from simple acts or statements of rebellion against repressive socio-political norms, but rather as being profound, lifelong learning processes, fraught with complexity and difficulty.*

Keywords: *analog, digital, cybernetics, Eros, Thanatos, psychoanalysis, trauma, death drive, hubris, learning*

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1. Introduction

It goes without saying that digital technologies are having an unprecedented influence on social and political life across the globe today. With the 'internet of things' we approach a point of convergence between 'the media' and every other kind of technology. However, the fact that terms such as the 'digital,' the 'internet of things' and 'virtual reality' apparently do *not* go without saying in the media today, and that on the contrary they are ubiquitous promotional metaphors, suggests a psychoanalytic symptom, or even a fetish in the classic sense (Freud, 1925/1989: 249-50). Arguably, the repetitive, quasi-magical use of these words points to something happening at deeper psychic levels, something that has not been entirely worked through – even something traumatic.

I believe this fixation runs much deeper than the technological developments of the last several decades. The un-worked-through discourse of the 'digital' today is the contemporary avatar of a much more ancient conflict involving the relation between language and experience that spans the human experience in its entirety – and which has made for particular difficulties in the history of western thought and psycho-social life. In some sense, however, this conflict is 'coming to a head' in the symptom of the digital fetish. In this paper I propose that the fetishization of the digital is a symptom of what Sigmund Freud (1920/1989: 618) and his interpreter Herbert Marcuse (1955: 22) called "the death instinct."

The death drive, *Thanatos*, is presented in Freudian theory as the antagonist of the life drive *Eros*, which both Freud and Marcuse agree has in a sense been suppressed in the process of civilization, due to the requirements of civilization. In *Eros and Civilization*, Marcuse (1955) disagreed with Freud's pessimism regarding an alteration in the terms of this conflict, and argued that civilization could be radically transformed in an erotic direction, such that the force of Thanatos (expressed in wars, ruthless competitive acquisition, the glorification of righteous cruelty and careless indifference to risk, etc.) would be to some extent tamed or pacified by Eros.

For Marcuse this involved the problem of distinguishing between 'basic' and 'surplus' repression, a task whose complexity has arguably been underestimated by some who cite him without much attention to the details of the whole psychoanalytic theory of *Eros and Civilization*. It is in order to illuminate this complexity of the digital as a socially and psychically repressive process

that I am setting the Freudian-Marcusean psychoanalytic approach alongside the cybernetic psychology of Gregory Bateson. In this frame, the death drive, Thanatos, can be translated into cybernetic terms as the *inhibition of learning*. Eros, on the other hand, comes into view as a continuous process of learning on multiple logical levels. Cybernetics draws out explicitly the dimensions of learning that remain implicit in Marcuse's erotic reorientation of Freud. Marcusean theory in turn deepens cybernetics as a theory of multi-dimensional learning and emphasizes the dangers of a digital fetish that reduces learning to the acquisition of bits of knowledge, to competency and control.

2. 'Digital', 'Analog' and Wholeness in Cybernetic Systems

Referring etymologically to the *fingers*, those ancient instruments of counting and manipulation, the word 'digital' as it is widely used today means 'a black box in which digitization happens.' Digitization is seen as an electro-mechanical process that occurs inside the media and devices we label 'digital.' With help from the cybernetic scientist Gregory Bateson (1971), we can see how this fetishistic use of the term serves to conceal the profound significance of the digital to human culture in every age of technological development. Batesonian cybernetics specifies that *verbal language* is the primary experience of the digital: culture has always been an 'internet of minds.'[2] Digital computers are merely an extension (admittedly massive in scale) of our already-existing linguistic activity. Digital communication comes broken into discrete manipulable 'bits,' like words or numerals. It is characterized by the 'arbitrariness' of the sign as it was formalized by Ferdinand de Saussure's (2011) linguistic theory. The digital can be generally described in terms of *that form of communication that fragments the whole into parts*:

> "A signal is digital if there is discontinuity between it and alternative signals from which it must be distinguished. Yes and no are examples of digital signals. In contrast, when a magnitude or quantity in the signal is used to represent a continuously variable quantity in the referent, the signal is said to be analogic." (Bateson, 1979: 227–8)

[2] Indian-Californian scientist Vilayanur Ramachandran offers a theory of an 'internet of minds' in relation to mirror neurons in the brain, and in particular the theory of an evolutionary burst of mirror neuron development that occurred in conjunction with the emergence of verbal language and complex tool use (see Ramachandran, 2009).

Sensory experience comes to us whole, 'without outlines,' without categories or discrete delimitation. But from an early age verbal language extends the fingers and hands in the sense that it facilitates the breaking of the world into discrete objects of contemplation.[3]

Verbal language has the peculiar quality not only of fragmenting the whole into parts, but also of counterfeiting and standing in for the wholeness of nonverbal experience. The digital cut, in other words, can conceal itself while making itself, by giving an apparently complete and seamless image of the whole of something. The word 'something' itself, the notion of a 'whole thing', is an example of this peculiar quality, as if there is some 'thing' that could be whole in itself, sufficient to itself and not in dynamic, internal, outline-less relation to the analog whole that exceeds it.

The way the digital cuts into the analog is exemplified in the contrast between a compact disc or mp3 recording and a magnetic tape or LP recording. The sound produced by the analog LP is a *direct transform* of vibrations in the needle. One can see (with a microscope) the waveform in the record groove that is quite literally the impression made by the sound of the music, passing through a needle, pulled across a wax template for the vinyl record. Analog audio-tape transfers sound vibration into magnetic variations on the tape surface in a similar fashion. However, with the advent of digitization, the pattern of magnetic differences on the tape or disc ceases to have any direct perceptible similarity to the sound, even under a microscope or via a magnetic image. As digital, it has become 'arbitrary' in something like Saussure's sense – meaning that the data must pass through a series of algorithms to transform it back into meaningful sound.

It is important to be aware that, depending on the level of resolution of the digital sample, more or less information is inevitably lost in the process of digitization. Digitization, in other words, is a process of abstraction and simplification. In moving from the noisy, ultra-high resolution patterns of the analog to the grainier bit-rates of the digital, it is always necessary to specify a cutoff, which is determined by the finite capacity of the processor and the practical limits of time. Whether this cutoff matters to the human ear depends very much on a host of contextual factors. One such factor is commercialization –

[3] The psychologist Daniel Stern reconstructs the experience of the prelinguistic and paralinguistic infant using an impressive synthesis of experimental observation and linguistic experimentation in his *Diary of a Baby* (Stern, 1990).

where the criterion of the *quality* of the sound of music may be obscured by ease of transmission-replication.

Digital communication can be vastly more efficient than analog – and this explains in large part the immense evolutionary 'success' of humans, whose linguistic extensions of experience permit an entirely new kind of adaptive process: culture. However, adaptive efficiency comes with a psychic cost, in the way it simplifies and cuts up the whole of experience. As we will see, the digital cutoff bears a very intimate relation with the Freudian notion of trauma (Freud, 1920/1989: 607), a kind of cut or wound that can numb our experience of the wound itself. The issue of abstraction for the purpose of transmission-replication-exchange (at the expense of 'use'-value) is also notably related to Karl Marx's notion of the commodity fetish (see Marx, 1990). Indeed the whole notion of the commodity is deeply dependent on the digital logic of discrete countable units. Alternatively, in a Heideggerian vein, being digitized nature becomes a 'standing reserve' (Heidegger, 1993) that can be exchanged and measured in identical units (whether it is in barrels or gigabytes). In Bateson's (1971: 365) terms, Freud's, Marx's and Heidegger's overlapping concerns can be summarized as the overextension or fetishizing of the digital and neglect of the analogical ways of thinking and communicating. Digital communication is not only profoundly useful; in fact in some sense that it defines 'human nature.' However, the digital *fetish* numbs us to the profound relation between body and machine, technology and nature. It obscures the relation because it locates 'the digital' simply in the machine and not *in relation to the linguistic processes of the nervous system*.

Of course, the digital fetish is a perfectly 'natural' potentiality of digital processes. Only a digital framework, after all, can produce the fiction of a 'digital entity' contained in the limits of a machine–some*thing* 'whole,' complete in itself, seamlessly self-contained. Gregory Bateson always insisted that, like any communicational phenomena, the digital exists as a relation and in a context, not as a simply located entity. For humans and all known mammals, this context is an analog one; the sinuous and noisy contexts of our experience and relationship cannot be digitized without loss. There is always a cutoff. A *trauma*.

Nonverbal gestures and signs are not 'arbitrary' like words, and their magnitude (the intensity of the expression) actually affects their meaning in a way that is not the same as or even comparable to words – for example as on the

printed page, surrounded by regularized-digitized white space. The word 'big,' displayed in the mostly digital context of a printed-displayed white page, is not bigger than the word 'small.' However, a face convulsed with emotion 'speaks' *with a greater magnitude* than one that politely indicates mild pity. The level of the analog is that of gestures and signs that in a sense are continuous with our whole comportment, our whole body-mind. In mammals particularly this is a level of what Bateson (1971: 370–2) calls 'relationship' (a term which he sometimes uses interchangeably with 'relationships' in the plural).This 'relationship' consists of the rich interplay of gesture, sound, touch and smell that encompasses mammalian social relations.[4] Among humans, this continuous interplay is usually unconscious. Human use of verbal language introduces a digital cutoff by way of a sub- or super-system; verbal language 'samples' the unspoken level of 'relationship,' and the set of 'samples' shapes the larger part of what we call 'consciousness.' Consciousness is a map of or abstraction from what is actually going on at the level of 'relationship', always with a limited resolution.

Using verbal-digital language, cybernetics tells us that we cannot not cut off. Bateson emphasizes: we should not forget it! (1971: 426–39). Forgetting the cutoff leads very easily to a distortion of priorities and a steep loss of information quality in the name of a quantitative gain in replication-exchange. The flattening generated by quick summaries of complex relationships in simple words ('justice,' 'crime,' 'God,' 'evil,' 'agency,' 'power,' etc.) obscures the complex structures of relations characterizing all mammalian social contexts, and particularly human ones. The analog needs to be mapped as richly as is feasibly possible for the sake of 'sane' communication.

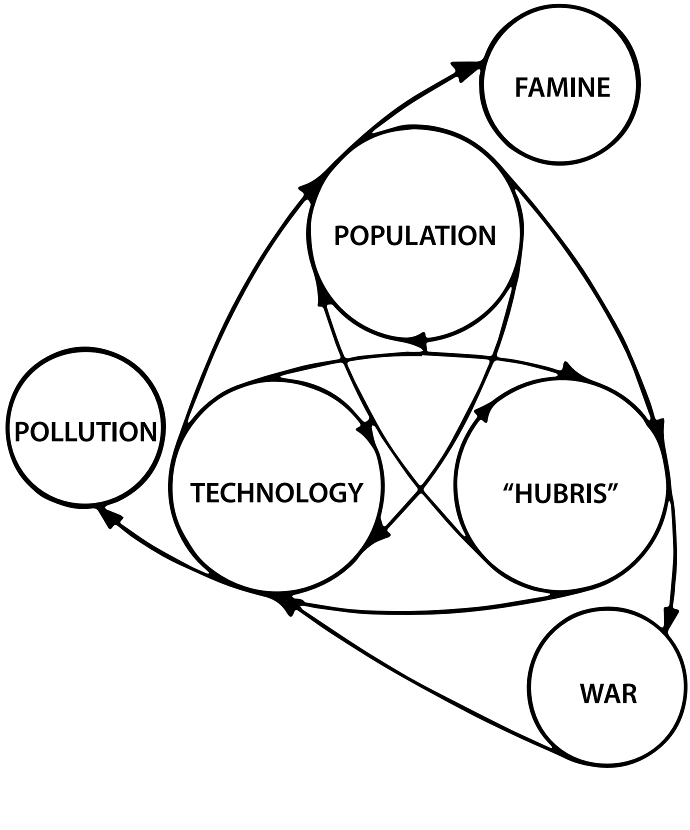
To sum up, according to cybernetic theory, digitization can be defined as the action of fragmentation, an inherent *part* of the human neural constitution, the part that deals in parts. Our perception of separate objects as such is made possible by our capacity to name them, and with this comes the human capacity for education and culture. All in all, the unique danger for humans is that our conscious linguistic activities, always reducing the complexity of relationship, might *radically uproot us* from the wholeness of the analog context. Human history is littered with cases of overconfidence in verbal formulations such as 'the

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4 Bateson suggested that insects might use digital rather than analog communication for "relationship"; but this in turn only highlights the profound intertwinement between the undigitized motions of the skinned-furred body and mammalian social activity. See *Problems in Cetacean and Other Mammalian Communication* (Bateson, 1971: 364–378).

enemy of my enemy is my friend,' or 'you are either with us or with the enemy'. The fetish for the digital betrays an excessive confidence in the autonomous power of digital machines and also in the autonomous power of verbal logic in the brain – without perceiving at all the intrinsic relations between machine and verbal logic, and between logic, emotion, and the self-as-a-whole. A failure, in other words, to achieve wholeness.[5] This failure, radicalized and unaware of itself as such, is what Bateson called 'hubris.'

Figure 1: "The Dynamics of the Ecological Crisis" (Bateson, 1971: 491)



[5] Bateson clarifies his view of cybernetics as wholeness in *Beyond the Double-Bind*: "But note that the word 'cybernetics' has become seriously corrupted since it was put into circulation by Norbert Wiener. And Weiner himself is partly to blame for this corruption of the conception in that he associated 'cybernetics' with 'control.' I prefer to use the term 'cybernetic' to describe complete circuiting systems. For me, the system is man-and-environment; to introduce the notion of 'control' would draw a boundary between these two, to give a picture of man versus environment" (Bateson, 1978: 52–3).

3. Hubris: the 'Digital Death Drive'

'Hubris' is Bateson's label for the psychic structure that accounts for the contemporary digital fetish. In classical Aristotelian philosophy 'hubris' is a kind of problem internal to the individual, an "error of human frailty" (Aristotle, 1963: 238). Bateson generalizes the definition: 'hubris' is an overestimation of the capacity of the part to represent and/or control the whole. 'Hubris' is therefore equally the refusal to accept Alfred Korzybski's verbal mantra, 'whatever you say it is, it is not.'[6] 'Hubris' is the belief that the word or map contains *all* the detail of the territory, leading to what Korzybski called 'unsane' modes of human interaction, comprising ever-expanding territorial possessiveness, aggression and murder.

'Hubris' comprises both the voice of Authority – what Bateson refers to as the 'top dogs' or 'upper dogs' – and the voice of Challenge to Authority – which Bateson labels the 'underdogs' (Bateson, 1971: 426–7). It is Hitler when he is a young, psychically wounded artist, and the 'same' Hitler when he is standing astride Germany and presiding over the slaughter of millions. It is Marx in 1848, and Marx in October of 1961 at the site of the explosion of the 'Tsar Bomb' by the Soviet Union. It is the arrogance of corporate elites, but also the tendency to view public life as invested with a much greater sense of control and direction than actually exists. 'Hubris' always fatally 'misunderestimates' the stochasticity of the fine-grained flux of the analog. It is the persistence in believing, in the face of all experience, that 'the unknown unknowns' will finally be mastered. This is the substance of its repetition compulsion – a failure to accept the digital cutoff. This failure, unable to accept itself as such, issues forth in ever more simplistic, polarized and binary renderings of the social context that remain as tragic today as they were in ancient Athens.

There is a rich theoretical link between Bateson's cybernetic-holistic-general-semantic concept of 'hubris' and Freud's concept of the death drive, the obstinate and aggressive antagonist of the life-drive, Eros, destructive to the self as well as others, expressed as a "compulsion to repeat" (Freud, 1920/1989: 604).

[6] Korzybski and his associated general semantics movement deeply influenced Gregory Bateson. "Science never proves anything," and "The Map is not the Territory" are the first two lessons that "every schoolboy should know," according to the first section of Bateson's *magnum opus, Mind and Nature* (Bateson, 1979: 27–31). To help correct for the sometimes-low resolution of that particular digital form we call North American English, Korzybski would apply a set of subscript numerals (1…*n, n* meaning 'wherever we stop counting') to any given term. I am employing this device here to help envision a simultaneity of the psychoanalytic and cybernetic visions ($\text{Eros}_{1,2,3}$ and $\text{Learning}_{1,2,3}$).

In the present cultural conjuncture, a prevalent form of the compulsion is to repeat the label 'digital' with ever-higher amplitude and ever-lower resolution.[7] The prevalent digital fetish is not only a symptom of trauma in the individual psyche, as both Freud and Herbert Marcuse surmised (Freud, 1929/1989; Marcuse, 1955), but it is also operating at the level of human civilization generally. I want to suggest that looking at the problem through the Batesonian-cybernetic and the Freudian-psychoanalytic lenses simultaneously has the virtue that Bateson attributed to binocular vision (1979: 69–70). The duplication of an information receptor (an eye for example) at a slight distance, seeing 'the same object' from only a slightly different position, results in not only additional or redundant information, but also a multiplicative and qualitative increase: the perception of depth.

The task of this kind of back-and-forth translation between the Freudian death drive and Bateson's digital 'hubris' is challenging because Freud and Bateson developed their psychological theories in fundamentally different scientific-practical contexts. Cybernetics tends to model whole systems in which every part is explicitly-simultaneously influencing every other part. The separation of the system into parts appears as a *digital-linguistic abstraction* that cybernetics makes explicit as part of its process-thinking, distinct from and related to the analog context. The complex distinction *and* link between the part and the whole is sustained in cybernetics monistically, by way of mathematical notation and terminology, which in particular has to do with the organization of parts and wholes in sets, patterns, etc. Freud, for his part, presents a quasi-mythic dualistic system whose elements, as 'eternal antagonists,' are separate and inseparable at the same time. It is as if, we might say, Freud fuses or con-fuses the digital and the analog where cybernetics distinguishes them; or equally, that Freud begins from a perspective of analogical wholeness where cybernetics, due to the analytical nature of its language, risk minimizing or even missing the traumatic quality of its own way of thinking.[8]

Nevertheless, the deep intuitive insight in Freud's images of the mythic antagonism between Eros and Thanatos, drawn equally from folklore, literature and his patients' character structures, often brings him very close to cybernetic notions of positive and negative feedback, of self-amplifying and self-

[7] As T. W. Adorno (2005: 65) wrote, "Always speak of it, never think of it".

[8] In *The Cybernetic Brain*, Andrew Pickering (2010) writes, "One can almost say that everyone can have their own history of cybernetics".

correcting systems. This is especially evident in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, in his treatment of Breuer's notions of "freely mobile" and "bound or tonic" cathexis (Freud, 1920/1989: 611), which clearly resemble positive and negative feedback respectively. A nascent notion of homeostasis is implied in Freud's discovery that the life instincts are "conservative in the same sense as other instincts in that they bring back earlier states of living substance; but they are conservative to a higher degree in that they are peculiarly resistant to external influences" (Freud, 1920/1989: 615). Freud's 'discovery' of the unconscious clearly anticipated and influenced Bateson, who in 1967 declared that, "people are self-corrective systems. They are self-corrective against disturbance, and if the obvious is not of a kind that they can easily assimilate without internal disturbance, their self-corrective mechanisms work to sidetrack it, to hide it, even to the extent of shutting the eyes if necessary, or shutting off various parts of the process of perception" (Bateson, 1971: 429).

According to Freud's final hypothesis, as expressed in *Civilization and its Discontents* (Freud 1929/1989), the telluric duel of Eros and Thanatos traps humans in an irresolvable double-bind. Unrestricted Eros threatens social bonds, because it constantly induces fresh claims and desires, destabilizing fixed relationships and character features. Thanatos appears from the beginning as a craving for stillness and order and the cessation of tensions. But Thanatos unchecked would be a desire to return to the womb and ultimately to regress behind life itself, to become inorganic (Marcuse, 1955: 25). By the very same token, the root of all social bonds is ultimately libidinal, and it is Eros that makes it possible for humans to "combine organic substances into ever larger unities" (Freud, 1920/1989: 616).The action of Thanatos in the interest of the social order has the simultaneous effect of weakening it, just as the expansion of erotic relations can also produce their disintegration. The death drive's forces of aggression help form the ego, but they also form the very entity (superego) that most threatens the stability of the ego. The superego emerges as "animal righteousness," (Bell & Horowitz, 2016: 74), compulsive rage at the perceived impurity of the other.

'To repress or not to repress' is Freud's translation of the Shakespearean double-bind, 'to be or not to be.' Freud remained pessimistic and ambivalent about this dilemma in 1929, as the ideas and actions that would lead to an attempted 'Final Solution' to the 'Jewish problem' in Europe began to materialize. Repressive controls are unavoidable corollaries of the maintenance of normal

social ties, controls whose traumatic intensity Freud found that many people were unable to sustain individually, and which could lead to explosive violence socially and politically, in a kind of blowback or 'revolt of nature' (Horkheimer, 1947). Freud's interpreter Herbert Marcuse summarizes: "The work of repression pertains to the death instinct as well as the life instinct. Normally, their fusion is a healthy one, but the sustained severity of the superego constantly threatens this healthy balance" (Marcuse, 1955: 53).

4. Wholeness – the Hidden Trend in Marcuse

In *Eros and Civilization* Herbert Marcuse (1955) claimed to have found a 'hidden trend' in Freud. Marcuse found grounds for a distinction between basic and surplus repression that would permit the loosening of certain civilized restrictions deemed *surplus* to the basic requirements of responsibility and survival:

> "…while any form of the reality principle demands a considerable degree and scope of repressive control over the instincts, the specific historical institutions of the reality principle and the specific interests of domination introduce *additional* controls over and above those indispensable for civilized human association. These additional controls arising from the specific institutions of domination are what we denote as *surplus repression*. For example, the modifications and deflections of instinctual energy necessitated by the perpetuation of the monogamic-patriarchal family, or by a hierarchical division of labour, or by public control over the individual's private existence are instances of surplus-repression pertaining to the institutions of a *particular reality principle*. They are added to the basic (phylogenetic) restrictions of the instincts which mark the development of man from the human animal to the *animal sapiens*. The power to restrain and guide instinctual drives, to make biological necessities into individual needs and desires, increases rather than reduces gratification: the "mediatization" of nature, the breaking of its compulsion, is the human form of the pleasure principle." (Marcuse, 1955: 37)

The utopian dimension of Marcuse's theory is a direct corollary of the basic-surplus distinction: our experience of the double-bind of repression is that of a particular historical era; it is not necessarily a universal human experience.

What appears necessary for civilization today might be discarded tomorrow as surplus. Controls on erotic activity, e.g., the rigidity of the institution of marriage, family structure, norms of public behaviour, etc. might all be greatly relaxed in a future social context where the energies of the death instinct called up for sustaining surplus repression have cooled off. In Batesonian terms, we could say that Marcuse is theorizing a release from the digital fetish, and his 'great refusal' (see Marcuse, 1964: 255–7) of repression can be interpreted as a refusal to accept the 'hubris' embedded in actually-existing social institutions. Basic repression would then be the result of a trauma made humanly necessary by the inevitable digital cutoff. Surplus repression, which is not at all humanly necessary, *results from the forgetting of that trauma* and a spiraling feedback loop of ever-steeper losses of resolution in communication of all kinds.

However, what might seem to be an elegant or convenient solution to the Freudian double-bind – distinguishing the basic from the surplus and discarding the latter – is subtended by Marcuse's complex meditation on the relation between Eros and Thanatos. Having extended the Marxist concept of surplus value into the psychic-instinctual realm, Marcuse does not seem satisfied. Rather, in Marcuse as in Freud, "The ultimate relation between Eros and Thanatos remains obscure" (Marcuse, 1955: 27).

The complexity of Marcuse's investigation in *Eros and Civilization* seems at times undermined by apparently simple binary formulations: "Domination differs from the rational exercise of authority" (Marcuse, 1955: 36). This and a general spirit that might be summarized as 'let Eros prevail,' overemphasized and under-thought, can obscure the importance of some of Marcuse's more ambiguous philosophical ruminations. Marcuse's exasperated attention to the complex paradoxes generated by the Eros-Thanatos binary can be cut off in the interest of building solidarity for the 'progressive' side. If one reduces Marcuse's meaning to a slogan such as 'be realistic and demand the impossible,' he can be easily assimilated to such tragic and spectacular figures as Guy Debord and Slavoj Žižek, brand names for viral symbolic-insurrectionary violence that explodes throughout 'social media' today.[9] On the global-celebrity academic

[9] The atmosphere of simmering rage that one often finds in 'social' media brings to mind Freud's pessimism: "And now it is to be expected that the other of the two 'Heavenly Powers, eternal Eros, will make an effort to assert himself in the struggle with his equally immortal adversary. But who can foresee with what success and with what result?" (Gay, 1989: 772).

stage, Marcuse is reduced to a footnote in the ongoing history of the insurrection of the underdogs.

But perhaps this simplification should not surprise us. After all, Marcuse's theoretical solution to the double-bind of surplus repression only places us in another double-bind. The civilized psyche is a product of surplus repression. This means that the death instinct colours its whole experience, along with its judgment and its relations with others. How, if one's life has been 'damaged' (Adorno, 2005), can one be sure that a given mode of conduct judged to be surplus-repressive, really is surplus? Marcuse makes it 'clear as mud': "[I]n the history of civilization, basic repression and surplus-repression have been inextricably intertwined" (Marcuse, 1955: 38). Marcuse's extended meditation on this problem, which includes his warnings about the repressive desublimation – i.e., what appears sexually liberatory might actually serve the forces of surplus repression – seem to cut against any easy sloganizing of Marcuse's theory of political resistance. A resolution to the conceptual tension this generates in relation to his affirmative invocation of Eros remains a hidden trend in *Eros and Civilization*.

It should be clear that the point of bringing Marcusean theory into conversation with cybernetics is not to refute Marcuse's (or Freud's) privileging of Eros over Thanatos. On the contrary, I think Bateson implicitly affirms Freudo-Marcusean Eros in cybernetic terms, conceptualized as a process of *learning* operating simultaneously on multiple verbal and nonverbal levels. Cybernetics does not refute or radically exclude the Eros-Thanatos binary as a map, but rather sets up another way of seeing the organism alongside psychoanalysis, where we begin with a unified monistic structure of inner relations, nota duel or mythic antagonism. Let us see what depth can be generated with a binocular view of the Freudo-Marcusean notion of instinctual liberation and a cybernetic concept of learning.

5. Eros$_{1,2,3}$ and Learning$_{1,2,3}$

To make more explicit what is hidden in Marcuse, I am employing subscript numerals ($_{1\ldots n}$) as my application of a *linguistic device* developed by Alfred Korzybski in *Science and Sanity* (1948), which he called the index. I am using this device to account for the fact that the Freudian term "Eros", as Marcuse uses it in *Eros and Civilization,* is very much *multiordinal.* To say a word is

'multiordinal' is to say that it refers to different logical levels in an ascending 'nesting' scale of wholeness. For example, point is different from line, line is different from surface, and surface is different from cube, etc. but nevertheless point, line and surface are all contained in the higher-dimensional wholeness of the cube. Freudo-Marcusean 'Eros' similarly refers at once to a pulsating flux of partial drives demanding gratification, as well as to the integrating forces that bind the Ego, and yet further to a kind of generalized energy of cohesion in the organism and (at a higher level of abstraction) among organisms.

Unbound primary $Eros_1$ is a violently unpredictable flux, almost indistinguishable in many manifestations from Freud's infamous 'oral aggression,' the desire to consume the loved object. However, $Eros_1$ also refers to the primary experience of continuity of being with the mother and is at the root of all social bonds. $Eros_1$ seems to be dominated by what Bateson might call positive or regenerative feedback loops that shatter the stable operation of homeostasis.[10] $Eros_1$ is, as it were, a steam engine lacking a 'governor' in the properly cybernetic sense of control-through-responsiveness. It corresponds to the experience of the human baby who intermittently explodes in hallucinatory traumatic screams and dissolves in blissful oneness with the mother, and who is otherwise unable to 'fend for himself' until a relatively advanced age (relative to other mammals). $Eros_1$, the level of fragmentary and partial drives, can be immensely destructive if it produces a conflict within the whole that contains it. The human infant requires a maternal or parental agency outside of it as its 'governor.'

In this fragmentary, incoherent form, Freud and Marcuse would say that Eros can *become* Thanatos. In a Korzybskian-Batesonian framework, speaking multiordinally, we can designate the fragmentary partial drives as $Eros_1$. $Eros_2$ would be of a *higher logical order,* a structure that binds together the partial drives – or more precisely, that *is* those drives, in a higher-order structure – and in this way makes the human being capable of responsibility to others. This can be described in psychoanalytic terms as 'repressive' in the sense that it represents a stage of greater self-control that evolves out of conflicts at the level of $Eros_1$, involving crucial 'altruistic' experiences of failure, self-sacrifice, etc. With such a multiordinal map of the psyche we gain a *sense of depth*: we can sense why for

[10] See "Cultural Contact and Schismogenesis" for Bateson's account of how positive feedback cycles within and between individuals disrupt psychic and social stability (Bateson, 1971: 61–72).

Marcuse Agape (responsible, self-sacrificing, divine love) need not be seen as the opposite of Eros. Rather it 'is' Eros *organized at a higher logical level*:

> "…nothing in the nature of Eros justifies the notion that the "extension" of the impulse is confined to the corporeal sphere. If the antagonistic separation of the physical from the spiritual part of the organism is itself the historical result of repression, the overcoming of this antagonism would open the spiritual sphere to the impulse. The aesthetic idea of a sensuous reason suggests such a tendency. It is essentially different from sublimation in so far as the spiritual sphere becomes the "direct" object of Eros and remains a libidinal object: there is change neither in energy nor in aim. The notion that Eros and Agape may after all be one and the same – not that Eros is Agape but that Agape is Eros – may sound strange after almost two thousand years of theology." (Marcuse, 1955: 210)

Not only does Marcuse reject the tradition of *replacing* Eros with Agape; he goes further, to the point of suggesting that Eros at the higher levels *is Agape,* that its wholeness is marked by an erotic as well as empathic (and traumatic) encounter with suffering, whether in the other or in the self – with Thanatos. The ambiguity and mystery of these formulations can be reduced, or seen freshly, if we imagine Marcuse as wanting to replace the traditional notion of moralizing Agape afflicting Eros with guilt, with a notion of Eros as a structural process operating simultaneously at differing logical levels.

$Eros_1$, a bundle of partial drives incapable of sustained empathy with others and lacking a character structure, corresponds to the Freudian *id* and to primary process. $Eros_2$ corresponds to 'normal' character development, the erection of a structure of controls that Freud recognized as repression of Oedipal ambivalence, the development of secondary out of primary process, feelings of guilt and self-worth etc. Marcuse is not advocating the 'liberation' of $Eros_1$ as against the controls and responsiveness characteristic of $Eros_2$. Rather, to put it in cybernetic terms, Marcuse aims to achieve $Eros_3$. $Eros_3$ would reform and bind the energies of socialization in a yet-higher-order structure. $Eros_3$ would feature deepening awareness of the multiordinal structure of $Eros_{(1,2,3)}$as well as of the double-binds encountered at the level of $Eros_2$ in a socially fragmentary context. Discourses of 'self-worth' would be supplanted by notions of self as a constellation of learning experiences.

This tripartite structure of $Eros_{(1,2,3)}$can be provisionally mapped onto Bateson's theory of levels of *learning* (Bateson, 1971: 279–308).[11] **$Learning_1$** is then the acquisition of bits or fragments of information (corresponding approximately in humans to Freud's 'primary orality', $Eros_1$). Most, if not all, living beings appear capable of this form of learning. **$Learning_2$**, which Bateson also called 'deutero-learning', is *learning how to learn bits of information by organizing them in sets.* This development is routinely accomplished by most 'higher' animals and by humans after the age of about three, and indeed is ingrained in us as a set of self-correcting, relatively static features of the kind Freud called 'character'(1908/1989: 293–7):

> "It is said that Mr. Jones is dependent, hostile, fey, finicky, anxious, exhibitionistic, narcissistic, passive, competitive, energetic, bold, cowardly, fatalistic, humorous, playful, canny, optimistic, perfectionist, careless, careful, casual, etc. In light of what has already been said, the reader will be able to assign all these adjectives to their appropriate logical type. All are descriptive of (possible) results of $Learning_2$…"(Bateson, 1971: 297–8)

'Character' formations are stereotyped and self-correcting habits of which we are mostly unaware, because they form the context of how we 'learn to learn.' 'Character' formations are inevitably at work in humans in every instance of the operation of conscious purpose. This corresponds to the level of the Ego and of $Eros_2$.

What would correspond to Marcuse's distinction between basic and surplus repression in Bateson would consist not in acquiring a piece of information about the nature of politics ($Learning_1$). Nor would it consist in acquiring a new way of acquiring pieces of information about social and political life ($Learning_2$), the level where a great deal of 'ideological critique' comes to rest. It would require learning new patterns of learning to learn, or **$Learning_3$**. $Learning_3$ is an *order of magnitude* more complex than $Learning_2$, an exponential and not additive expansion, which would be experienced as a continuous dynamism in a new dimension whose existence could not be inferred from the contents of $Learning_2$. Bateson said that a normal human adult would encounter Learn-

[11] We might, for example, provisionally ignore the difference between 'love' and learning. After all, Bateson defines learning as change, and love continually changes us – if it does not change us in each moment it is more than likely bound at the level of character or a partial drive (Eros1 or Eros2). For more on Bateson's theory of levels of learning see "The Logical Categories of Learning and Communication" (Bateson, 1971: 279–308).

ing_3 as an event of supersession of life's difficulties, a 'conversion experience', an overall opening of the self beyond the ego's conscious purposes that Bateson called 'the larger system.'[12] This would in turn involve a profound *analog-digital integration*, a quantum leap forward in the capacity of language and consciousness to map social experience richly, without forgetting the traumatic cut digital language applies.

In practical terms, looking at Marcuse's basic-surplus repression distinction through a Batesonian lens, we may have a clearer sense of why it is not sufficient merely to transmit or receive the 'correct' political information, from the 'correct' wing of the spectrum, as if one wing holds a monopoly on repressiveness or responsibility. What is needed is a *fundamental flexibilization of ways of learning to learn*, a flexibilization that shatters the narrow fixation of a few behaviour patterns (avaricious acquisition, neurotic co-dependence, limitless self-evaluation, self-justification and vilification of the hated other, etc.).We need to transcend the narrow fixation on the acquisition of information and control where 'the digital' (inside or outside our skin) is fetishized as the whole of learning. We need to shake loose this digital fetish that operates *as* the commodities as much as it operates among them, and this requires a fundamental and dynamic epistemological shift connecting the level of self to the level of the larger system, encompassing self-in-society and in turn society in the whole biosphere.

6. $Learning_4$ and the Political Problem of Wholeness

But this is to point to what we might call $Eros_4$, corresponding to what Bateson labeled as **$Learning_4$** which, as he conjectured very briefly, might be achieved at the level of the evolution of an entire population or the biosphere *in toto* (Bateson, 1971: 293). It seems plausible enough to compare what Bateson means by $Learning_4$ (i.e. a fundamental transformation of terrestrial mind and nature via the overcoming of 'hubris') with what Marcuse means by 'revolution,' which he explicitly articulates in terms of the *liberation of nature from*

[12] Bateson describes *Alcoholics Anonymous* as an organization aimed at helping its members to undergo the difficult process of Learning3 as the only effective way to transcend addiction patterns. The first step is admitting I have a problem and that I cannot solve it, that I must appeal to a Higher Power than my own judgment for aid. A shattering of fixed patterns of Learning2 can result in psychic breakdown, a reversion to Eros1 in Freudian terms; hopefully it may activate higher order learning patterns such that multiple patterns of Learning2 can be noted and compared in the self. The unicity of the self is both abandoned and consummated as the Wholeness of Self-in-contact-with-Higher-Power (Bateson, 1971: 309–337).

domination. And yet Bateson explicitly distanced himself from the Marxist identification with class schismogenesis and certainly never endorsed any idea of 'revolution.' We have seen that the Freudo-Marcusean theory of instinctual liberation bears many implicit similarities to the Batesonian theory of learning, and that the surplus repressive double-bind ('how can I eliminate surplus repression from within a surplus repressive context?') can be traversed, if not undone, by approaching the entire psychic structure in terms of multiordinal levels of organization ($\text{Eros}_{1,2,3}$). We thereby move from a quasi-mythic binary system (Eros v. Thanatos) to a monistic multiordinal system typical of cybernetics.

The difference between Freudo-Marcusean theory and Bateson's is not erased. A relation has been established without eliminating the difference, which is necessary to maintain the depth for the binocular vision of Bateson's metaphor.[13] For just as Marcuse's text may be vulnerable to a reduction to insurrectionary romanticism, misguided acts of provocation, interminable vindictive self-righteous blame, etc., cybernetics is vulnerable to what the radical Leftist group Tiqqun call 'the cybernetic hypothesis.' Tiqqun remark incisively on the socio-political significance that Bateson's theory has had in practice:

> "Under the influence of Gregory Bateson, the Von Neumann of the social sciences, and of the American sociological tradition, obsessed by the question of deviance… socio-cybernetics was aimed, as a priority, towards studying *the individual as feedback locus*, that is, as a "self-disciplined personality." Bateson became the *social editor in chief* of the second half of the 20th century, and was involved in the origins of the "family therapy" movement, as well as those of the "sales techniques training" movement developed at Palo Alto. Since the cybernetic hypothesis as a whole calls for a radically new physical structuring of the subject, whether individual or collective, its aim is to hollow it out. It disqualifies as a myth individual inwardness/internal dialogue, and with it all 19th century psychology, including psychoanalysis…. Each person was to become a *fleshless envelope*, the best possible conductor of social communication, the locus of an infinite feedback loop which is made *to have no nodes*. The cybernetization process

[13] There is in fact another possible approach that I do not have time to cover in this paper, namely treating Freud's confrontation of Eros and Thanatos, as a lived experience of a mythic archetype, in the therapeutic relation, as itself a formation of Eros3, albeit one whose *necessarily social dimension* was expressed in more tragic and ambiguous terms than in Marcuse, for example in *Civilization and its Discontents*.

thus completes the "process of civilization," to where bodies and their emotions are abstracted within the system of symbols. " (Tiqqun, 2001: Section III, para. 1)

Bateson's relational theory of the psyche, for example, as interpreted and practised by some family therapists, has dissolved from Learning_3 (patients and communities learning dynamically about the way 'mental' illness is learned in social contexts) back into Learning_2 (moral judgments of families – see particularly Bateson, 1978: 231ff). This in turn may have helped clear the field for that simplest and most invasive of technological psychic controls, the pharmaceutical-commodity form (Learning_0). This inertia, it might be argued, resulted from Bateson's failure or refusal to articulate clearly a *specifically socio-political* distance between his notions and those of traditional morality, civilized values, etc.[14] Mary Catherine Bateson has questioned her father's refusal to commit himself to political action, which she conjectures may have derived from war trauma:

> "I believe that Gregory's rejection of political action came out of his World War II experiences, when politics were directed toward the defeat of an enemy, and Gregory's own role in psychological warfare involved the deliberate corruption of communication. Thus, I see him rejecting an action program that, by defining purposes and particularly the purpose of victory, would embrace a deliberate blindness. We have, however, in our heritage from the Greeks, side by side with the idea that politics are about domination and power over the other, the idea that politics are about conversation – that the process benefits from disagreement and difference." (Bateson, 1991: 320)

On the other hand, to describe contemporary global politics as a 'conversation' seems rather optimistic – at least more so than it may have seemed in 1991.In this 'damaged life' (Adorno, 2005) the 'spiritual' or 'internal' dimensions of the struggle may sometimes be more important or all that is possible in a given time and place. Contrasting Batesonian psychology with Lacanian psychoanalytic theory, Gad Horowitz notes that in Bateson's work hubris remains a 'systemic-ecological-epistemogical-cognitive' issue and that Bateson does not directly confront the "inevitable traumatic incursion of language into Being" (Horowitz, 2016).

[14] This failure or refusal arguably places Bateson close to the pessimistic position of Freud, though he does not occlude the social dimension of the ego as much as Freud's quasi-mythic language can do or be made to do.

What do we see when we look simultaneously through cybernetic and psychoanalytic lenses? That 'partial' Eros ($Eros_1$ and $Eros_2$) can be destructive as well constructive to wholeness. That a 'correct' course to 'liberation' cannot be given in its entirety, complete and whole, in any non-contradictory language. Perhaps it must begin and end with questions rather than answers:

> "Perhaps there is no single vision that everyone should agree on; perhaps the essential wisdom will be woven through the discourse of diverse communities. Perhaps I am right only by virtue of being contradicted, but whoever drowns out my words, for whatever reason, is surely wrong…. The central achievement of political action and education may be the broadening of political agendas, the acceptance of new patterns of relevance." (Bateson, 1991: 320)

Then again, cybernetics reminds us that information can be most easily corrupted by the addition of more and more information, ultimately resulting in insignificant noise. Too much noise impedes the articulation of the higher dimensions of relevance.[15] So it would be 'surely wrong' to allow Marcuse's chilling last words in *Eros and Civilization* to be swallowed up in a cybernetic sea. They are truer than ever today:

> "Theology and philosophy today compete with each other in celebrating death as an existential category: perverting a biological fact into an ontological essence, they bestow transcendental blessing on the guilt of mankind which they help to perpetuate – they betray the promise of utopia. In contrast, a philosophy that does not work as the handmaiden of repression responds to the fact of death with the Great Refusal – the refusal of Orpheus the liberator. Death can become a token of freedom. The necessity of death does not refute the possibility of final liberation. Like the other necessities, it can be made rational – painless. Men can die without anxiety if they know what they love is protected from misery and oblivion…. But even the ultimate advent of freedom cannot redeem those who died in pain. It is the remembrance of them, and the accumulated guilt of mankind against its victims, that darken the prospect of a civilization without repression." (Marcuse, 1955: 236–7)

[15] Mary Catherine Bateson's response to Klaus Kippendorff's pessimism about political communication, recorded as part of her introductory lecture for "Cybernetics in the Future" the 2014 conference of the American Society for Cybernetics, Washington D.C. (M. C. Bateson, 2014), illuminates the issue of 'cutting through the noise' of global political discourse (Kippendorff's comment occurs at 1:02:40 in the video, Bateson's reply follows).

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ORIGINAL SCIENTIFIC PAPER

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The Female Target: Digitality, Psychoanalysis and the Gangbang

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Abstract: *The essay culls from classical texts and personal experiences of libertine intimacy with strangers to address age-old academic blind spots regarding group sex as a recurring fantasy and sexual practice. What is brought forth is a Freudian and Lacanian analysis of the relationship between contemporary desire and digitality through "the gangbang" as articulated on digital platforms. The focus is on digitally-assisted gangbangs involving a transvestite and several heterosexually identified males, and what such events reveal about digital media's and heterosexuality's demands. The author argues that this sexual configuration is a re-enactment of "the great misdeed", which Freud recounts in Totem and Taboo as the mythic primordial killing of the Father by the band of brothers. This symbolic occasion is described as the genesis of social organization and re-emerges as a form of mourning the disappearance of the fleshly body as new media turn it into digital code. Such a codification of the body awakens anxieties around the fictitious conflation between penis and phallus. In the face of the digital, man outsources his phallic power, which is suddenly required to be represented corporally at all times, to a virtually organized multitude that is willing to sacrifice freedom in the name of the group, and the legitimation of hetero-masculinity that it can presumably grant. The gangbang also appears as a digitally mediated opportunity for old fantasies of aggression and expiation to articulate themselves without putting the white male heterosexual body on the line.*

Keywords: *psychoanalysis, digitality, digital culture, rape culture, gangbang, group sex, trans, cross-dressing, cruising, death drive*

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> "Because there are three, one of them can watch what the other two are doing together. (…) Or, because there are three, two can worry about the third, for instance the one lying down."
>
> Lydia Davis, *The Cows*

1. The Phallus as Collective Trompe L'œil

In the summer of 2009, I attended a conference in France entitled *The Unconscious and Sexual Identity*, organized by a Lacanian research group. The room was filled with renowned panelists, mostly practising psychoanalysts, and the moderators were celebrities in the field. The ideas raised were theoretically fascinating, but the comments were anodyne, and the discourse rather technical. For an intellectual space whose language was supposed to be desire, nothing indicated that we were speaking about bodies and bodily practices. It was as if in the name of rigor, erudition or decorum, concepts had to be handled with latex gloves – no matter, or precisely because of, how messy they were, as if not to taint, or implicate, the bodies of their handlers.

That is until a lone woman in the audience raised her hand and punctured the protocol. Her very physicality felt conspicuously out of sync with the well-coiffed multitude that surrounded her. Her red hair was too voluminous to be tamed into place, her skin slightly weathered, her demeanour unapologetic. Without hesitation, she delivered a response about women's bodies being mediators of sex between men, heterosexuality's most fundamental schema, by claiming that feminine mediation became most literal *in the gangbang*.

In a conference about sexual identity, on its third day, that had yet to consider something other than the heterosexual desire of the couple, apart from its supposedly opposite homosexual counterpart, which simply "confirms" it, the woman's speech caused no visible commotion. Yet it worked as a Pandora's box opening, the kind that makes others feel guilty, if not intellectually dishonest, for not having initiated such a move sooner. One comment, and its straightforward delivery, introduced the body as a living organism among many

– potentially ugly, porous, dishevelled, disgusting, leaky, horny, smelly,[2] and uninterested in its intactness –into the domain of a legitimate object of inquiry. [3]

The woman's comment cracked open the limits of the discourse as its recognizing the gangbangable body – the body as gangbangable – meant a recognition of the body in practice, that is, the body that wants too much, too much and all at once, the body that wants *because* and *despite*. To see this body and to speak it is to expose oneself as an animating agent of such a body. It is to refuse the omniscience and distance associated with a masculinist position, which we may call *écriture masculine*: a masculine way of writing bodies out without risking disclosing the status of one's own. To render the gangbang public meant implicating her self in a sexual multiplicity that is loud and obtrusive, that is, in the terrain of the unavowable, the disgusting, the not-so-catholic noises (Giard, 2014).

Virginie Despentes (2006) recognizes in collective male laughter a seminal sign of the brotherly multitude that enacts a gangbang, the brotherhood on which the gangbang depends, but also the general (rape) culture – a methodically arranged gangbang in its own right. Despentes notes that man's attempts to live up to the myth of the phallus always fall short, regardless of the various technologies he may use to mimic a convincing phallicity, such as artificial limbs in their literal and symbolic forms (Despentes, 2006: 37). This phallic failure thus begets stratagems of denial and the interpellation of the group as a way to masquerade absence, inability and frailty.

The phallus depends on a complex network of technologies to hold itself up in a spectacular non-fragmentary fashion. One way of forging a believable phallus, or a sense of it, is through the coming together of "a number of men" who unite "in strength superior to any single individual and remain united against all single individuals", which amounts to the constitutive dynamic of civilization (Freud, 2011: 53). For Freud, "artificial limbs, so to speak, [are] quite

[2] Gayle Salamon, via Merleau-Ponty and Freud, reconsiders identity and the drive, and sexuality more generally, as an atmosphere, an odor, a sound, or a *leading towards* which points to past and future and spans multiple temporalities (Salamon, 2010).

[3] The body is, for Foucault, "a volume in perpetual disintegration" (Foucault, 1977: 148). Its condition as always already disintegrating gains explicit status with online representation of the cruising body, as it is pulled apart and back together, cropped into limbs and re/de-contextualized by the self who makes it anew and the other to whom such bodily compound is supposedly addressed. Fictions of intactness are at the center of Guy Debord's concept of *spectacle* in a way that echoes the digital sex session as a specular and spectacular technology of disavowing the fragmentary existential condition of the body, evolving "into a world where even the deceivers are deceived" (Debord, 2014: 1).

magnificent when equipped with all his accessory organs; but they do not grow on him [on man] and they still give him trouble sometimes" (Freud, 2011: 59). Following this logic of gender configuration, Preciado sees the impossibility for man to ever nurture a link of solidarity with someone other than another man (Preciado, 2008: 318).[4] This solidarity, that of the brotherhood that the gangbang displays so palpably, is exclusionary, as all solidarities, and rests on the inferiority of women, enabling men to laugh among themselves the loudest laughter, made louder through numbers.

Despentes calls collective rape, also driven by the gangbang ethos of non-consent and masculine multiplicity, masculinity *through* multiplicity, a war strategy that promotes one group's virilization over another (Despentes, 2006: 35). Man's soldier-ness is thus literalized in the temporal juxtaposition that the gangbang performs: The battalion is not dispersed through time, kinship and geography (from father to husband, for example). It is not even housed inside an inbox with thousands of emailed photographs from potential, rejected and done-and-discarded digital lovers, but all at once in the same space with a clear and palpable target keeping their multiplicity from becoming one (Despentes, 2006: 37). The gangbang is thus an apparatus of death-driven brutality in the repertoire of what Haver calls *orthosexuality* (Haver, 1996: 3), and Javier Sáez and Sejo Carrascosa name *the feathers* of heterosexuality, alongside genocide, nuclear terror, racism, misogyny, sports, engines, alcoholism, gangs and risk (Sáez & Carrascosa, 2011: 119).[5]

For Jonathan Dollimore, the terrain of the unavowable – the "not-so-catholic" configurations, temporalities, noises, and smells – too often suggests "anxiety if not aversion" (Dollimore, 2001: 367). This surfeit of a body (of orifices, blood, piss, vomit and overpowering hunger), excised from theoretical work and from conference rooms alike, shares a kinship with "one of the most significant repressions of academic writing about sexuality," namely, disgust (Dollimore, 2001: 367). Disgust, which is excessive, as it trespasses on the limit of good taste, has a critical organizing function for sexual identity, practice,

[4] Jack Halberstam notes the complementary relationship between men in his reading of the film *Dude, Where's My Car?* (Leiner, 2000) arguing that before the menace of castration and humiliation, the dudes face their obstacles "as a team, a unit, a collective, and each functions as the other's phallus, or weenie". Patriarchal power takes, then, at least two: "one to be the man and the other to reflect his being the man" (Halberstam, 2011: 66).

[5] Sáez and Carrascosa also include "shouting," "pushing" and "spitting" in the roster of the "obsessive rituals" of heterosexual masculinity (Sáez & Carrascosa, 2011: 120).

politics and discourse: "the sexuality of some straight men is organized around a barely concealed contempt for, but also a fundamental disgust with, women. Crudely, they fuck them despite – or because of – not much liking them" (Dollimore, 2001: 368).[6] In a gangbang scenario, the bonding of the brothers is achieved through the formation of an ambivalent target – it is wanted and reviled in unison, and its desire must be explicitly addressed through and for the group, as its annihilation (Dollimore, 2001: 371).

There is a silent etiquette that governs sexual noises and academic conference rooms, which not only polices the excitation/disgust divide, or composite, but also genders them: Loud moaning feminizes the subject as it indicates the 'too-much' of desire that the subject is simply too weak to contain. The gangbang ensures that excess of desire is evenly distributed by the number of men in the space, whereas the feminine body is made extra vulnerable to libidinal excess by being that much lonelier in a room full of strangers. It is as though in a war whose victory and defeat are pre-determined by the sheer quantity, or asymmetric force, of those on one side and the sole target on the other side. That is, precisely the type of war currently fought across the globe, whose drone logic turns the battlefield into a hunting ground, doing away with the traditional relationship between sovereignty and borders.

Contemporary digital culture demands a certain priapism from bodies. This is a perpetual interpellation of bodily visibility that male subjects have historically not "enjoyed," or have historically not been demanded to put forth. Self-display, when it comes to clothing, for instance, was progressively renounced by male bodies starting in the 18th century through Industrialization in what scholars have called The Great Masculine Renunciation. This meant that women became responsible for marking and flaunting class and gender difference through adornment, granting men protection from the perils of self-exposure. Masculine bodily presentation became progressively self-effacing, sober and inconspicuous: the very cut and colours of the male suit have remained virtually unchanged for hundreds of years when compared to women's dress.[7]

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6 Susanna Paasonen remarks that heterosexual pornography tends to revolve around "female bodies as desirable yet somehow disturbing, disgusting, or even abject". I would argue that the abject-ness of the feminine object is a precondition for it to reach desiring status, which, as Paasonen suggests, works to maintain a safe distance between subject and object through disgust so that the first cannot be swallowed by the latter (Paasonen, 2011: 216).

7 For a critical account of The Great Masculine Renunciation (see Silverman, 1986).

We can thus see that there is something quite new and unsettling for men to suddenly, through the demands of constant digital representation of their bodies (that ultimate site of phallic failure), find themselves interpellated by the position of being-looked-at. When they are finally asked to represent themselves bodily, even if such a demand does not do away with their ability to look, new strategies for managing the threat of phallic undoing emerge. Furthermore, men are forced to come up with new ways to over-compensate the emptiness of that undoing, as well as new narratives for denying the sameness that the phallus aims to mask.

The forging of the mirage of the phallus goes necessarily through the group, not only in the scene of the gangbang, which the digital makes practical, if not probable, but in the many ways men pose for selfies, which consistently involve pointing at other men in the frame (particularly in workout culture selfies): men making sure their hands are always rigid, never resting, never pointed at themselves but at the bodies of their fellow men. In the absence of other men, social media selfies of men often include phallic props, such as these men's cars, trucks, alcoholic bottles, dogs, joints, bongs or protein supplements.[8]

In a gangbang setting, the perpetual rigidness is both material, through the help of active accomplices, and aural, through noises of a specific kind – like the sound from slapping the (t-)girl on her bottom, the audible comments to the other men, and their collective laughter. These noises are elicited as if to remind the men that they are a brotherhood but also individuals, albeit circling around the same target: They have not merged into oneness, which would feel incestuous, homosexual and ensnaring.[9] The exchange of such sounds works like a call-and-response game where the other's reply will always be a confirmation of what sense the sex scene has for its agents: a "we are all in this together", which further alienates the (t-)girl and puts her in *her* place of ensnarement.

Catastrophe, or the dreaded failure to abide by the fantasmatic regulations of heterosexual intercourse, is never too far away, as even the cleverest necropo-

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[8] For Alison Winch and Jamie Hakim, an obsession with muscular male bodies online is necessitated by a politics of austerity that literally strips men of being able to boast material goods. They are left with their bodies to work on and display as a plea for symbolic legitimization and cultural belonging (Winch & Hakim, 2017, forthcoming).

[9] The complete loss of individuality is precisely one of the most fundamental necropolitical technologies granting men in a position of power – Western heterosexual white cisgender males – the luxury of omniscience and omnipotence. Entire populations are managed, and marked to die, through the very process of losing their status of human subjects and becoming masses to be occupied, through surveillance, migration, institutionalized violence or drowning with their sinking boats (see Mbembe, 2003).

litical techniques risk malfunctioning. Failure hovers over, always awaiting, in the process of undermining the sex scene (Giard, 2015). The disgust that the figure of the gangbang is supposed to elicit in a woman in the general culture is constitutive to her, for she is supposed to yield, not yearn. Her response to the spectacular cowardice that brings joy to the supposed agents of the scene must be one of only partial consent, which makes the gangbang an essentially rape-like spectacle. Due to the sheer difference in numbers – the active multiplicity *against* one single presumably passive body – confirms, in the most scopophilic ways, the asymmetry that codes, and drives, the scene of the gangbang. The gangbangable body cannot completely long to be gangbanged, or, at least, shall not admit to it. Her loud moaning comes about as the *après-coup* of man's ability to make woman speak not her pleasure, but the brutality of their own bouncing off of her.

2. Caulking, Shutting, Sealing: The Hole and/in The Frame

The introduction of the gangbang in the conference room that worked as a preamble to this essay spawned a new sense of academic integrity for me, one that allowed the body proper, the body in practice, my own cross-dressing body of the night before, my body of each and every night if sexual enjoyment is to happen at all, the nocturnal body of the t-girl for solely sexual purposes, *my* body, to be present, to be available, to be heard, to be smelled. Ironically, this body is missing even in the pornography of every night, in my bedroom and on my screens, obstructed by the ocean of men trying to penetrate its every hole, bust the female target into pieces, or piece her into a target. In gangbang videos and photographs, all one sees, after all, are men's backs and buttocks obstructing the visual evidence that a woman is there somewhere, if anything, to keep the proximity of the male bodies from gaining homosexual status. If my only entry point into this economy of heterosexual violence seems to be to dress up as a girl and claim trans not as a stable identity, but as a technology, this also tells us how much the digital discloses the fragility of the concept of sexual difference. The popularity of my online ads, where a t-girl looks for straight men for a gangbang, points to the status of "woman" in the digital age, or perhaps to the loss of woman's body, which is mourned into the broader, less bounded, category of the target – which covers a larger area. Here the object (of desire) is exposed, in all of its psychoanalytic glory, as a semblance, not a substance.

Scholars have argued that the digital is rooted in a binary logic in its back-end, the actual code that mobilizes data flows and makes images appear in highly pre-determined ways. By the time we interact with the manifested digital content, much like what happens once sexual partners arrive at a sex scene like a gangbang, all the chips are down. Tara McPherson (2012) has referred to this binary structuring and archiving of data as a lenticular logic where two things are never true at the same time, but remain necessarily segregated. Yet at the level of affect digital networks are experienced mostly in a highly privatized fashion, which can lessen the surveillance of the superego (while raising other more institutionalized types of surveillance), allowing for desire to derail itself back to its original queerness and away from its normativizing, orthodox and orthopedic channels.

The abundance of the male butt(hole) in the frame of gangbang pornography is excused as that excess is understood in the name of the overarching objective of the scene: the utilizing of woman's *holes* as if to deny one's own, or rather, the spectacular confirmation of woman as a collection of holes to be handled by a collection of men. The gangbang is an intimate (re-)erection of borders. Such tinkering with a hole-infested body to be managed by the group ends up producing the visual occlusion of the body in question in favour of a visual overabundance of the male hole and its vicinity. If the target is virtually kept from view, it must have been properly hit, claimed and occupied. At the level of the very frame, a scene that is meant to perform and enhance the intensity of an invincible phallus – and to confirm the passivity of woman – her lack of wholesomeness – produces an undeniably homo-sexual visual spectacle. Through the devouring of woman's holes (or, of woman into holes), which leads to the curious exhibition of the male hole and its provinces as a collective, another fantasy of hermetic masculinity is told.

Since the male ass may serve as evidence of a universal hole (the anus has no gender, no race, no trans or cis status), it is generally disavowed through laughter and absence from the field of vision in non-pornographic conditions.[10] Sáez and Carrascosa argue that male heterosexual subjectivity is based on a (male) body whose mouth can be open but whose ass must be sealed, whereas women

[10] On laughing as a violent kinship operation between men to the detriment of women, or femininity more broadly, as it plays out in digital trolling see Phillips (2015).

can prop their asses open provided their mouths remain shut (Sáez & Carrascosa, 2011: 73).

The anus and its vicinity function as signposts for this universal condition, that is, of the human body as an open wound, unbounded and perpetually exposed, that transcends genderization and other forms of border control. Sáez and Carrascosa note that the skin has pores and, through them, water is exchanged with the environment. The stomach and intestinal walls are also porous, and it is thanks to that very porousness that the nutrients of food can be assimilated by the body. As a matter of fact, they argue, the survival of living organisms depends on their systems being open (Sáez & Carrascosa, 2011: 92).

Control of the anus, which is literally framed by the buttocks, may even mark "something like a point of subjectivation" in the constitution of the subject, which the gangbang aims to shut, like the fixing of a leak, in woman, and disavow in men – despite visible evidence to the contrary. The anus and its vicinity overtake the frame while the men caulk the very small anatomic evidence that props up naturalized fictions of a material female lack – the vagina, or its "opposite," in the case of the t-girl (these two figures, with such different genitals being so interchangeable in the scene of the gangbang is quite telling), as if emptying their own anal-existential anxieties by filling woman up to the brim.[11] The heterosexist system hinges on the magnification of a small genital difference so that woman functions as the absolute other (Sáez & Carrascosa, 2011: 119).[12] As one potential gangbang participant from *Craigslist* once put it, "I can beat that pussy up and I love to DP [double penetration] and really get that slut airtight". The organizers of a Bay Area gangbang recently advertised on *Fetlife* highlighted plans for a triple penetration (woman's mouth, vagina and anus filled by penises) and entitled that event an "Airtight Party". And if gay gangbangs are often scenes where pharmacological drugs such as crystal meth and poppers are meant to relax the feminized bottom's sphincter we can presume that the looser the target the more room there is for it to be filled.

Human Rights Watch published a report on Iraq in 2009, which described a gay extermination technique that involved cementing the victims' buttholes

[11] In a clarification that can help us understand the interchangeability of feminized bodies counting as *the female target*, Jordan Crandall reminds us that drones, that ultimate embodiment of digital violence, have no windows, that is, what matters is their function – what they can do for/to us – not what is inside them (Crandall, 2011).

[12] For Fethi Benslama, concerted violence tends to ensue when rupture in processes of identification, or its threat, specifically involves fellow beings who are ultimately rather alike (Benslama, 2016: 101).

with a potent glue of Iranian provenance, which could only be extirpated with surgical intervention. The gay men would then be forced to drink diarrhea-causing medicine and implode in a type of involuntary fecal self-bombing devoid of any martyrdom. The torture and subsequent extermination would be captured and promptly viralized through cell phones. Interestingly, the act does not infect the assailants with the annihilating gayness that they impinge on their victim, as if immunity to the feminizing *lack* could only be granted through its violent pegging onto someone else – ideally by a group. Here the infectiousness of lack is contained and performed jointly through a physical projection that literalizes a symbolic – and founding – projection (of lack) already made in the unconscious: *it is woman who does not have it*. A similar logic played out in Libyan dictator Muammar Gaddafi's downfall as he was violated by a sealing of sorts – and also memorialized on video (extending the kin-making to fantasmatic brothers who may not have been physically present to witness it) – by rebels shoving a stick up his ass. The identification between "gay" and "anal sex" may be complete, but the torture centres exclusively around the bottom gay, or the psychic labour of containing gayness in bottom-ness. It did not occur to the Iraqi militia to castrate top gays or to extend gayness to those who penetrate supposedly gay bodies (Sáez & Carrascosa, 2011).

I once brought to the attention of my Gender Studies undergraduate students the fact that a lot of them felt compelled to preface their blog posts with "as a heterosexual male…" before expressing their opinions. One ("heterosexual male") student, then, emailed me with an account of the following game, which he described as a common elementary school prank between boys, to illustrate his justification for the self-identificatory prefacing: it "revolved around one student placing his hand on a peers [sic] shoulder. For however long the hand was left on the kids [sic] shoulder determined how 'gay' the person was. The game may seem harmless at the time, b/c it becomes a competition to remove the person's hand from the shoulder as soon as possible. But when the punishment for being slow or not reacting determines 'gayness' probably stimulates the crazed out defense mechanism that probably follows kids into adolescence." (Personal communication, September 27, 2011).

In the gangbang, as the men act diligently to plug woman's openings, to tag openings as woman's (whether their bearer literally be cis or trans, or gay bottoms – the necropolitical is staged through clustering bodies into "populations") femininity carries a toxicity similar to the transmitting powers of gayness in the

children's game described above: a hazard to be managed before our exposure to it enlists *us* as one of *them*. When "we talk about an object of desire, we are really talking about a cluster of promises we want someone or something to make to us and make possible for us" (Berlant, 2006: 20) As such, femininity and lack are zoned off as the dangerous properties of the other while the male self is further engulfed as a body amongst other male selves, guaranteeing a collectively established signification to "male self" beyond a shadow of a doubt: if he is gay I am gay and thus if he is not I am not. The male self is thus able to share not just woman, or the labour of tagging a gay body as unquestionably other, but the anxiety, and psychic precariousness, of maleness in general – a category dependent on the constant and brutal management of corporeal borders.

The anus as a site of heterosexual undoing is tamed in the gangbang through the violent mission enacted towards the female target, said to be the driving core of the congregation, like a drain, which excuses whatever exposure of normally disavowed (male) lack, or hole-ness. The omnipresence of the male ass in the frame in gangbang pornography and in the scene of the gangbang *in situ* points to a flaunting of man's privileged position, the same kind of urge to display one's fictitious immunity to lack – produced and celebrated by the group – that governs so much online violence, such as harassment, stalking and trolling. Since the target of men's gangbang assembly is so loudly (re-)inscribed, the practice cuts them some slack, forgiving certain visuals and acts that may, in a different setting, throw them into the perceived lack-ness of the homosexual. Were this undoing ever to take place – if the female target went missing, or failed to do its job – we could expect new differences to be forged amongst the bodies that were left to count so that new targets, and new brotherhoods, could emerge.

Masculinity is, clearly, not in the genitals or chromosomes, but in the successful, and bound to at least partially failed, maintenance of an impenetrable body. In the images that document and represent the gangbang, the gangbang's fragments, the heterosexual male body has presumably never come this close to being penetrated, as men boast of their unused cavities, brushing them against the very tools that would potentially rupture their fantasmatically sealed holes, and perhaps courting them – as if to display their successful brush with their own undoing, or death. They know they will survive because by the time woman arrives she is already dead.

3. The Digital, The Multiple, and 'The Great Misdeed': The Gangbang As Bereavement Ritual

The strategy of phallic production through male multiplicity is called upon at a time of phallic crisis that digital culture launches by demanding that men's bodies be exposed and exchanged constantly. Man has probably not been in such a vulnerable position in relationship to his physicality since "erecting himself from the earth" and adopting an upright position, "which made his genitals, that before had been covered [by a bent-over gait], visible and in need of protection" against feelings of shame (Freud, 2011: 66).[13] This demand can only sustain itself through representation (digital or otherwise), outsourcing (to racialized others, to the group, or to weapons), and pre-emptive refusal to perform, or to perform alone. The gangbang's male multiplicity feasting around a t-girl's body may, for example, project not just lack, but the penis specifically as a potentially malfunctioning tool as woman's exclusivity since the feminine body in the middle bears a malfunctioning penis: The devouring of a disarmed bomb, or the salvaging of a downed drone. When drones crash, in fact, their owners are often reluctant to admit proprietorship.[14] A *Craigslist* lover once put it in a text message, as he inquired about my own penis: "I like to see it flapping out of control while I'm in control!"

While pornography itself is based on an erection-penetration-ejaculation circuit culminating in the money shot, contemporary digital culture is driven by an erection-erection-erection circuit with the demand for actual penetration anxiously hovering over it. As a networked system with an endless potential for cruising, from one hyperlinked node to the next, the Internet fosters and sustains arousal. It is only invested in its resolution inasmuch as it gives way to its re-ignition. This drive towards an excitation that never finishes echoes a neo-liberal ethos that fits nicely with fantasies of invincible masculinities. Websites need *traffic,* not respite. This is a promise only a team of agents – an entire army of drone pilots – can keep, with its multiple bodies, turns and shifts. There *are* ways beyond the group, or the gangbang, to manage the weight of the priapistic demands of the digital, and neoliberal ideals of productivity – Sáez and Car-

[13] Freud describes this moment as "a time when visual stimuli became paramount," and a new life form began. He also associates this with a lowering in value of the sense of smell. (Freud, 2011: 78)

[14] For a poetic-political reading on the erotics of drone crashing, "The shiny drone, the smashed drone", see Crandall (2011).

rascosa suggest *fisting* as a technique for the perennial erection of a genderless member, for instance. The fist and the anus show sexual difference, which dominant systems depend on, to not be "so evident, and perhaps *not even relevant*" (Sáez & Carrascosa, 2011: 111).[15] We can see one way of dealing with the digital injunction for phallic exposure in the frequency with which men post photographs of themselves working out online with hashtags such as #loading, #beasting and #beastmode, along with peptalk-like captions that seem to solely address other men, not women, and refer to their bodies as profit-driven machines immune to feeling. The hashtag here assumes the feminine function as a kin-making device linking men but only remotely.

The viral broadcasting of rape also works like an increasingly popular way of managing the burden of priapistic circuits. Here certain men are quick to not only attack, but also boast about committing assault, documenting their crimes and publicizing them. This is true for the Steubenville rape of 2012, when members of a football team "dragged a 16-year-old girl almost naked from party to party", while she was unconscious and promptly "fondled, fingered, and urinated on" by at least two boys, and this was then shared by many more through the Internet. A larger group, dubbed the 'rape crew', took pictures and videos of the dead living body, which they then posted on *Twitter*, *Facebook* and *Instagram*. In one particularly disturbing video, a young man cracked jokes about the ongoing actions, claiming "they raped her quicker than Mike Tyson raped that one girl" (Chun, 2016: 97).

We see a similar logic in many other cases where boys cannot keep themselves from raping, but very specifically, from sharing the rape, when making the rape public through viral broadcasting becomes the most fundamental aspect of the act. The pleasure seems to be in the flaunting of the other's body as a gaping wound for which one is responsible, which promptly takes the gaze away from possibly surveying one's own body and the potential wounds, or holes, inherent to it. To rape collectively, to rape with and for the network, to gang-rape digitally, becomes more important than any physical, or sexual qua sexual, pleasure the abuse could trigger in the rapist. Stanford University rapist Brock Turner, who served three months in jail for his crime, took the time to snap a picture of his victim's breast mid-act to share with his swim team bud-

[15] Paul Preciado also points to the fist, and any human limb, as equivalent (if not superior) to the penis' sexual function (Preciado, 2000).

dies. The Vanderbilt University rape case also illustrates this, as Brandon Vandenburg and his friends literally gang-raped an unconscious girl and still took a video and pictures to share with those who could not take part in the event live. Images of surveillance cameras that became widely available on *Youtube*, showing the young men dragging the unconscious girl's body (the girl is often unconscious – would it matter if she was trans, a gay bottom or a doll?) from place to place add a chilling layer to the story, as reaching some kind of fantasy of notarized airtight masculinity is worth more than one's freedom. One is willing to risk anything but to remain outside masculinity guaranteed through and for the group.

In 2016, a group of around thirty men raped a 16-year-old girl in a *favela* in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. Thirty was still not enough to assuage the men's drive to gang-rape, as they promptly shared images of the violence online, most notably on *Twitter*, where a video of a man sticking out his tongue in front of the girl's bloodied body/corpse, post-rape, was accompanied by lines such as, "this is where the train passed by hahaha, these chicks are too easy", and, "hahaha the train really wrecked this one" (Moraes, 2016, my translation).

The highly precarious ways of managing the burden of priapistic circuits in the digital, exemplified above, refer us all the way back to what Freud described as the "great misdeed" that laid the foundation of human sociality. Freud explains the ambivalent relationship contained in sacrificing the Father by linking his murder with the death of the totemic animal in clans where the killing of such an animal was so occasional that when it happened it was undergirded by a holiday ethos, a ritual of "loud festival gaiety" that accompanied the temporary lifting of a prohibition. In a culture of rape, it seems as if assaulting the female body, or the body made female through assault, would hardly constitute an event such as the parricide described by Freud. In such a dynamic of gendered, or gendering, banality of violence, the thrilling holiday ethos lies in the circulation of the act of cruelty, not in the act itself. The flow of data here mirrors and dramatizes the violent rush put forth through what certainly can feel like unlimited *bottomless* dissemination.

The murder in Freud's account of the great misdeed, or its mourning, could only be carried out by the various members of the group, never by one single individual. The effects of the feast could thus be multiplied at the level of fantasy and the guilt involved was promptly relieved through sharing. If the sense of

individual force gains priapistic dimensions through collective circulation, the guilt derived from violence simultaneously diminishes. A sense of kinship was reiterated as these brothers in death celebrated and lamented, as they dreaded some kind of retribution for having killed the animal. We can see how electing the animal as the object of sacrifice enabled the murder to be repeated infinite times, whereas a Father's death is unrepeatable. This brings forth a convenient economy of substitution where there will always be an easily accessible target to hit, which is at play in the interchangeability of girls and t-girls in the gangbang scene. In this manner, the t-girl appears as the ideal object of desire, able to trigger the kin-making destructive response from the gangbang men, now brothers, while keeping the subsequent need to mourn to a minimum.

In Freud's scene, the brothers may have joined forces to overthrow the Father, but they were still each other's rivals among women as the post-murder guilt drove them to institute the prohibition of incest, "perhaps the most maiming wound ever inflicted throughout the ages on the erotic life of man", turning their eyes away from the mother and towards representatives of her semblance, that is, *women more broadly* (Freud, 2011: 74).[16] Totemism worked as a palliative settlement, helping the brothers to deal with the anxiety stemming from having killed the Father by keeping his surrogate – the totemic animal – safe, while justifying that, had the Father treated the brothers themselves as they treat the totem, they would not have had to kill him. It was thus in death that the Father was most obeyed.

Since, for Freud, the totemic animal is a substitute for the Father, this scene of kin-making murder and mourning illustrates not just the interchangeability of objects-cum-targets (and certainly, of their materiality) but also children's contradictory feelings towards the paternal figure, who is both venerated and despised, "envied and feared" (Freud, 2013: 129). Freud's account and expansion of the Darwinian conception of the primal horde suggests that a new form of technology, "a new weapon", might have enabled these brothers to finally rebel against a Father who kept "all the females for himself and [drove] away the growing sons". This new technology would have brought the brothers a

[16] A *Facebook* posting by a recent *Craigslist* lover, ahead of the 2015 Superbowl, illustrates some of these points, "Having played both soccer and football, I recently happened to witness and be a part of something that would not be in my best interest to mention in detail, but what I got out of it is what my coaches, bosses and fraternity have preached to me all throughout my life...no one person is bigger than the team...no one person should ever feel or act as if they are...a team is always one... one focus, one goal, and should always work as one, both mentally and physically" (Personal communication, 2015).

feeling of superiority, giving them the push needed to put their feelings (of violence) into practice and eat their victim raw, like "cannibalistic savages" (Freud, 2013: 129).

If we extend the great misdeed further as a blueprint for the thrilling dynamics at stake in the gangbang scene, we can see how this switch of targets from the actual Father to his bestial representative suggests that the t-girl is a rather seductive target for the gangbang feast. The t-girl's dubious status – simultaneously is and is not woman – makes it particularly easy for men to toggle between the appropriateness of the target as an object woman enough to merit destruction but not woman enough to produce guilt. Let us also remember that by the time the t-girl enters the scene, her penis is already dead. In fact, the deadness of the penis, at least in its status as a fleshly surrogate for the phallus, is the t-girl's *raison d'être.* The fashioning of the gangbang's target as a t-girl at once dramatizes the eminence and irrelevance of sex in the drive to destroy and to repair. Genitalia, that presumed gendering guarantor, are either blocked from view (by the multitude of male asses in the frame and the fact that only the target's ass can be *used*) or rendered nonsensical, or rather, non-lenticular (many things are true at once). The gangbang then is not a parricide or a matricide; it is a violent response precisely to the anxieties that gender's lenticular logic begets.

For Russell Grigg (2014), mourning is, in fact, not about losing the object but commemorating it. He stresses the way in which mourning insists in preserving the *semblance* of the object – considering its materiality may be missing, as in death. Mourning is, then, a commemoration of semblance (of smells, of mannerisms – what *counts* as the object). It is crucial that this commemoration be at once private and public, as we can see in the various rituals of bereavement – including, I am arguing, the gangbang – and totems such as the AIDS Memorial Quilt. Thus, while, for the congregating men, the gangbang can be a perfectly liminal site for a primal settling of accounts in the public and the private, for the gangbanged subject herself (the t-girl in the context of this essay) it can be an opportunity to render her private position public, to seek legitimacy by inscribing her woman-ness publically (yet privately), particularly when her woman-ness is not sufficiently passable to be taken out into the socius somewhat safely – as is the case here, with t-girls who only cross-dress for the purpose of sexual encounters with heterosexually identified men.

While the great misdeed revolved around the killing of the Father, Melanie Klein (1988) reminds us that human subjectivity is founded on violent fantasies of destruction directed at whoever the caretaker is, along with feelings of guilt for having destroyed, even if just in fantasy, that which guarantees one's survival. I am arguing that while the great misdeed was a highly gendered event, the affects that made it possible, along with the affective reactions that it caused (mourning, guilt, and destructive reparation), speak to an actually non-gendered drive to destroy and replace, to kill (as much as possible) and to mourn (as little as possible), to congregate and to topple, to ruin and to repair, and, most importantly, to make reparation *by* ruining – by ruining *again*.

Sáez and Carrascosa argue that sexual binarism and the myth of the heterosexual-reproductive couple cannot operate in the domain of the anal, which defies its genitally dependent logic. The anal also questions another binarism, the one that divides human beings into heterosexuals and homosexuals (Sáez & Carrascosa, 2011: 56). They refer to Paco Vidarte's ethics of anality (*analética*), a counter-cerebral ethics of solidarity "more urgent, honest, carnal, cruising, animalistic, prone to the basic necessities of those whose asses stick up in the air (…)" (Sáez & Carrascosa, 2011: 66). For Vidarte, this ethics would suck in everything and give nothing back in exchange, "usurping all that falls in the vicinity of our black hole". An *analethics* is thus a bottom-centric scatological response to man's priapistic fantasies of bottomless violence. This ethics of anality is a barebacking ethics from the vantage point and for the benefit of the gangbangable body, where LGBT militancy would try a very different politics, in which all would go inside, all would be received, all would be allowed to penetrate so that we would "release shit and farts (…)".

This new queer politics would embrace the *reality* of sex, and not its *realness*, by surrendering to the inexorable instrumentality of bodies and their one-sided needs of circulation, refusing "exchange, dialogue, and negotiation" (Sáez & Carrascosa, 2011: 69).

We might imagine how this *analethical* stance can spill over onto (social) dynamics beyond the sex scene – dynamics that shape the gangbang, but are not necessarily infected back by it. This is an active anality where the ass gets to choose its objects and functions, and it chooses all. Here the ass speaks back to genitalized sexual difference, universalizing the subject as a wounded subject of a lack whose sheltering, or hospitality, defies and signifies passivity and open-

ness. In this *analethic* economy, brotherhoods would be disarmed because by extending kinship to all anus-bearing subjects there would be no-one else left to become a target.

4. Surrendering to Semblance, Retreating to Bottomlessness

On the libertine French site *Netechangisme*, several of the profiles feature duos and groups of male friends who share the same single account as they look for potential (female and trans) partners together – even if the interface itself only allows for joint accounts featuring one male and one female. *Troifoisplus* ("*Threetimesmore*"), for instance, presents itself as "3 young men (19, 21 and 23 years old): Mathieu, Sofiane and Enzo for single or group encounters for providing women pleasure". In the users' comments associated with their account, where past lovers can leave performance reviews akin to those on *Yelp*, *leagourmande* ("*greedy Lea*"), a t-girl, praises the men as being an *equipe de choc*, that is, a dream team, or more literally, the type of helmet and body armour worn by police forces responsible for dispersing crowds. One of their techniques is to line up along the extremities of a street, as though they form a wall, and to move slowly towards the congregated men. *Bukkorgang* is one of several profiles that call themselves organizers of threeways, gangbangs (*pluralité masculine*), cuckold sessions, and back-to-back blowjobs (*pipalachaine*), that is *pipes à la chaine*. *Pipes* means "blowjobs" in French and *à la chaine* means "one after the other" but also "assembly-line work".[17]

The Brazilian *roda de samba* also illustrates the dynamic behind the gangbang's *equipe de choc* in its labouring woman (and man) into being – an example of what Preciado calls a cybernetics of power, in which power circulates through *shared* performative fictions that are transmitted from body to body like *electric loads* (Preciado, 2008: 317). The *roda de samba* is a manifestation of working class culture, normally associated with the slums of Rio de Janeiro. It traditionally consists of various male musicians sitting in a circle, drinking, riffing and improvising songs not unlike a jazz jam session. The lyrics to these *sambas* tend to sing the praises of traditional gender roles and the female form with impromptu and rhyming *double entendres* that lead to male laughter and bonding.

[17] *Jc-lyon*, who organizes regular events feature "one woman + transvestite + 3 or 4 bisexual friends (35 to 60 years old)," claims to have "a stock of about fifteen buddies so it is easy to find some that are available."

While the men sing, women dance in the middle of the *roda* (circle) of men holding their instruments. The woman's function in the *roda de samba* is that of a travelling target, a mobile eye-candy somewhere between a spinning top and a rotating bottle in a truth-or-dare game that keeps the men from having to stare at one another.[18] As an excitation and shielding device, she is a reminder and a justification of the men's congregated multiplicity. She brings them together whilst keeping them from *sticking* together. Hers is a prophylactic function, maintaining men's relational status and barring contagion.

The gangbang's exceptional status – it is an event that is at once heterosexual and queer – speaks to the totemic feast as its excitement also lies in the rarity of its manifestation. We tend to think of the gangbang as an unusual event, in its violence, excitement and frequency. The gangbang is a carnivalesque holiday. As a *Craigslist* responder told me in Las Vegas once, in order to justify his asking me if he could bring his buddy along to my hotel room, "We are in Vegas, so we are like, what the hell, let's fuck a shemale together".

The gangbang works as an air pocket in the quotidian chokehold of a system of otherwise draconian maneuvering in which the Father is as dead as he is ironclad as a ghostly presence. The Father's absence is his "deification", turning him into a coding metastasis, which instructs everything, bringing cohesion from scene to scene into a sequence, in a way that his non-virtual presence never could. To the question, "What is the father?" Freud replies, "It is the dead father." (Freud, 2011: 135). His annihilation is the guarantee that he will never arrive to vex the virtues held up by His image. Ironically, a Fatherless society becomes a patriarchic one (Lacan, 2006: 688).

What Freud calls the "inciting factors" of the primordial disposing of the Father, guilt over the Father's murder and defiance over his authority, have lasted through generations as a kind of damned inheritance, or a symbolic DNA. This is illustrated, for instance, in the persistence of religion and monarchies throughout history, with their god and godlike fatherly figures, and the repetitive rituals without end associated with them. For Lacan, the Father's castration leads to him "being nothing but a number", which is "indicated quite clearly in dynasties" (Lacan, 1971: 14). The gangbang functions, then, as an uncanny re-appearance. When considering the uncanny, Freud stresses the element of

[18] *Netechangisme* user *pachour22* tells me, "my goal is that you become my sex toy for myself and my friends". Private communication in chatroom, retrieved from *Netechangisme.com* (2014, February 20).

an unsettling return of something familiar, which had been kept hidden. He also relates the uncanny to infantile fantasies of the double (an imagined lost twin sibling a child may imagine), which the gangbang multiplies into triples and more, and which appears as "an insurance against destruction of the ego", a denial of the irreversible power of death (Freud, 1919: 9).[19]

The manifestation of ambivalence that drove the brotherly rebellion against the Father, as we have seen, simultaneously reconciles and re-enacts the murder for which the brothers seek expiation; as in the law of retaliation in which "a murder can be atoned only by the sacrifice of another life", which can also work as a blueprint for understanding the addictive function of cruising writ large, and barebacking in particular. In his seminal essay "Matan a Una Marica" ("A Faggot Is Being Murdered"), Perlongher (1997: 36) lists gay hate crimes and AIDS as outsourced rites of sacrifice and penitence that produce a pragmatic eradication of otherness and the (not so) secret pleasure that accompanies it.[20]

The bodily sites that remind the subject of his own lack, that is, of his own death, what Haver (1996: 12) calls "the body's lamellae" (i.e., the ears, the vagina, and *above all,* the anus) are violently *stuffed* in another disavowing coup. When the gangbanged body is that of a t-girl, the aim comes into focus more clearly, as she represents not only anality, but also liminality itself. As a visibly wounded site, the t-girl is the gangbang's ultimate target as a symbolic and material bearer of the very failure of "corporeal integrity of the so-called self". The gangbanged body being that of the t-girl is also exacerbated, as she represents bodily lamellae (she is a hole, one hole is all she has), by associations with "infection" and "otherness 'itself'", which Haver links to the said lamellae as unsettling "surfaces that are both inside and outside (…)" (Haver, 1996: 12).[21]

In the gangbang scene not only is the power of the penis, the representative of the phallus in practice – its fictive animation – multiplied by the number of them in the room, but the introduction of a third (and fourth, and so on, through physical or digital sharing) male body in the session legitimizes the t-

[19] Juliet Mitchell (2003) argues that siblings (in reality and in fantasy) introduce the child to seriality and death anxiety: *Where do I go now that there is another one of me?*

[20] Fethi Benslama sees in the figure of the "über-muslim" ("surmusulman") terrorists for whom the kinship-making injunction to attack is not about *becoming* but regressing to the past, a similar kind of expiation through annihilation, or sacrifice, "[s]uch terror aims to reveal a destructive force that dreads nothing (…)" (Benslama, 2016: 19, my translation).

[21] On the ears as unsettling lamellae, we might recall the multiplicity of men's laughter during a gangbang, and their conversations amongst themselves as though a (t-)girl was not in the room.

girl further as a *her*, and not a gender-neutral *you*. One man is thus able to refer to the t-girl by addressing someone else, forcing the gender-defining pronoun *she* to be uttered, whereas if there were only one man and one t-girl in the scene, the gender-neutral *you* would be the only pronoun possible – language failing to wound the t-girl enough to publicly inscribe her as woman. That is an event of language –with incredible (meta-)physical consequences in which *bearing* (the make-up, the accouterments, the lack) is *being*. As such, the same event can hold vastly distinct functions as it works as a re-enactment for the man but, at the same time, as the t-girl's first entrance into the symbolic system in some ways founded by the great misdeed.

Like fire starters, the male multiplicity locks the t-girl's feminine position into place once her mediating presence locks *them* into relation. "The pussy is never yours…It's just your turn!" says the Internet meme.[22] As one *Craigslist* trick said to another right before cumming inside me, "This bitch would be a nigga's best friend in jail…". Here, "this bitch" holds the gender notarization function that a "she" guarantees when the t-girl is stuck not before man but between men.

This setup authenticates the t-girl as a woman through the male multitude's speech. When one man addresses another man in reference to her, he performs not only the function of "speaking to or about someone" but, and most importantly, a "way of approaching another such that one presumes who the other is, even the meaning and value of their existence", as Judith Butler puts it in response to an unarmed black man addressing the (police) State with "Black Lives Matter", a way of saying "*You* – white police officers – recognize my/our humanity!" (Butler, 2015).

In the gangbang, where a multiplicity of men (re-)gender a (t-)girl into place by the uttering *she* or *her*, and by sharing her body as they would a meal, the tone they use to hail each other reveals a belittlement of the negotiated feminine object-cum-female target. This belittlement reiterates she-ness as a filament, if not a net, safeguarding the men from taking *each other* for a *she* (Butler, 2015).

If the gangbang is thus an event in language in which ambivalence is resolved, the digital is a network where age-old anxieties over ambivalence re-emerge, bearing the trace and the *veering* of their original violence but also teeming with opportunities for the re-claiming, or re-coding, of that very vio-

[22] Retrieved from http://memegenerator.net/instance/53728866.

lence. The gangbang, and the gangbang with a t-girl as its target in particular, is at once reactionary and subversive; it laughs with and laughs at the coding that makes its engendering possible. The gangbang is *realistic*. It makes good use of the code, computational and psychic, in order to find pleasure where it can. The gangbang does not re-write; it reads between the lines. The gangbang is ultimately *trans-sexual*, even if a t-girl is not its literal target, for its very dynamic exposes the functional role of each body, any body, in a sexual encounter. Driving the gangbang is a politics of survival where even if, or especially if, the materiality of the body is seen to deny such survival from the t-girl: bodily functions matter, not matter itself. Matter disappears, only fantasy is left, along with bits of bones, mounds of flesh, holes (avowed and disavowed), and the promise of never-ending fluids, like an entirely repaired spring-like breast that never dries up.

I have pointed to the male collective as the agents of what we could call an archaic and infantile need to destroy and to repair, to destroy as a way of making reparation. I have also established the figure of the digitally enabled t-girl as a spectre of re-signifying creativity, enjoyment and the hacker ethic. As such, the backend of networked communications (the digital) is not only intimately entwined with the backend of psychic structures (the unconscious) but they also abide by mirroring architecting powers and emanate corresponding analytical value. The digitally mediated gangbang is an emblematic instantiation of the network's own orgiastic relationship to the data flows that constitute it. The gangbang is, then, a case of the heterosexual symbolic running at once at its most normative and its queerest, allowing unprecedented access to the way dominant forms of code perform themselves and to imagining techniques of enjoyment in the face of the pre-determining propensity of all code. The gangbang bugs the system without bringing it to a halt, making room for non-utopian possibilities of enjoyment that make a mockery of the body as a bounded individual entity and of the future as something other than a cock-blocking operation (Shah, 2015).

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ORIGINAL SCIENTIFIC PAPER

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Chaosmic Spasm: Guattari, Stiegler, Berardi, and the Digital Apocalypse

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Abstract: *In this paper I explore the intersections of digital media, psychoanalysis, and the subject through reference to Felix Guattari's notion of the chaosmic spasm, which the Italian philosopher Franco Berardi picks up in his work and most recently his book And. Guattari's idea, which appears in his Chaosmosis, designates the fatal acceleration of the media semio-universe towards spasm, or apocalyptic collapse, and the emergence of some new form of schizoid organisation. Following an exploration of Guattari's idea, and a broader discussion of its relationship to his wider thought and Anti-Oedipal collaborations with Deleuze, I consider how Bernard Stiegler may be seen to provide a meta-historical account of Guattari's concept of the spasm in his Technics and Time. According to Stiegler's account, the hyper-acceleration of media forms results in a process of disorientation and de-subjectivization where the individual is destroyed because of their inability to situate themselves in social, symbolic, structures that have collapsed towards hyper-rational, meaningless forms. In Lacanian terms, psychosis becomes a kind of generalised condition. In response to this generalisation of madness, Stiegler imagines the need for a new politics of knowledge and grammar that is able to suture individuals back into wider social systems and provide the kind of secure, careful, space that D. W. Winnicott writes about in his work on play. In order to unpack what this politics of culture and knowledge might comprise, I turn to Guattari's work on schizoid subjectivity, or endless subjectivization without subjectivity, and Berardi's contrast between financial semio-capitalism and poetry, in order to suggest an ethical mode of thought and cultural expression that might capture the political core of Stiegler's vision and paint a picture of what human thought might look like on the other side of the new media apocalypse, the chaosmic spasm.*

Keywords: *chaos, meaning, globalisation, new media, psychoanalysis, subjectivity, apocalypse, Guattari, Stiegler, Berardi*

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1. What is the Chaosmic Spasm?

How can the concept of the spasm, which describes muscular over-stretch and a sudden painful compensatory contraction, capture the experience of contemporary new media globalisation? In this article I take the idea of the spasm, and more specifically Felix Guattari's (1995: 135) notion of the chaosmic spasm, to explore the reality of subjectivity in contemporary new media society. The concept of the chaosmic spasm appears at the very end of Guattari's final work, *Chaosmosis*, which explores the possibility of the translation of the chaos of processes of globalisation into some kind of territorialised fundamental thought able to support a liveable form of subjectivity. Guattari writes:

> "Psychoanalysis, institutional analysis, film, literature, poetry, innovative pedagogies, town planning and architecture – all the disciplines will have to combine their creativity to ward off the ordeals of barbarism, the mental implosion and chaosmic spasm looming on the horizon, and transform them into riches and unforeseen pleasures, the promises of which, for all that, are all too tangible." (1995: 135)

In this context the chaosmic spasm describes the transitional moment where nonsensical chaos folds over into meaningful complexity that can be effectively integrated into a new mode of schizoid human subjectivity that is sensitive to endless change and uncertainty. For Guattari (2009), this mode of subjectivity-endlessly-in-the-making, which he calls *subjectivization*, is the only way to live with the kind of complexity that global capitalism or, in his words, integrated world capitalism has thrown humanity into. However, it is not that Guattari thinks that complexity is problematic or unliveable in itself, because what we find in his *Three Ecologies* (2014) is a vision of the potential, which is implicit in the recognition and experience of complexity for humans, to truly come to terms with the ecological truth of their existence on earth. The problem of global complexity and the new media universe, which has emerged since Guattari's death in the early 1990s, is, therefore, not simply about complexity in itself, but rather the kind of wide open tech world into which it throws the post-modern subject, a world without effective coordinates or cultural signposts to enable proper, liveable, subject formation. It is this cold, unliveable, techno-capitalist world that Guattari wants to over-turn through the chaosmic spasm, which indicates the apocalyptic collapse of human significance in a blizzard of

empty communication and the possibility of a new way of making meaning that is able to express humanity's place in the world, where the world is built upon an understanding of ecological being on the earth. In order to explore Guattari's (1995: 135) idea of the chaosmic spasm more fully, in the first part of this article I unpack the concept in conversation with Arthur Kroker's (1993) theory of spasm from his book of the same name, before moving on to consider the development of global processes since Guattari's death in the early 1990s. The point of this work is to situate *Chaosmosis* (1995), which, it seems to me, theorised the potential collapse of integrated world capitalism and the rise of a new symbolic order based on a fully realised recognition of ecological interdependence, in the history of global capitalism and the development of what Hardt and Negri (2000) talk about in terms of empire in the period since the 1990s.

Specifically, here I refer to two events, (1) 9/11 and the subsequent 'war on terror' and (2) the global financial crash and consequent world recession, which might be read through the lens of Guattari's (1995) theory of the chaosmic spasm since what they can be seen to represent is the moment when the overreach of empire became apparent and the *spastic phase* of globalisation that we currently occupy started to take effect. Apart from social and political manifestations of this *spastic phase* – which we might understand through reference to the rise of nationalism in America, where Donald Trump has suggested the withdrawal of *the land of the free* from the world stage, and similar phenomena in Europe, where opposition to the project of European integration has seen the UK vote to leave the EU – we can also trace the impacts of the failure of the global symbolic order that emerged in the late 1980s / early 1990s in the rise of a range of individual psychopathological effects, including depression, despair, anxiety, and outbursts of sadistic violence. We can find examples of these kinds of psychological responses to what we might call global psychosis brought about by the failure of the symbolic system of Guattari's (2009) integrated world capitalism everywhere in contemporary society. Against the depression, despair and anxiety brought about by the apparently meaningless world, many have sought to escape into repetitive addictive behaviours that are able to offer relief from the chaos of life, while others have fallen into suicide or suicidal violence projected onto constructed enemies. Perhaps this is how it is possible to understand the continuum between the savage violence of Islamic State in Syria and Iraq, which is concerned with resistance to the collapse of the Islamic

psychological world under the pressure of western modernity, and the suicidal violence of European Islamists and so-called lone wolves who take up the cause of Radical Islam in order to rage against their worlds. What the European Islamists in the UK, France and Germany are playing out is their own suicidal response to the collapse of their worlds through the lens of a global and, beyond this, cosmic struggle between good and evil that can give their acts significance. In this respect, it would be correct to say that the European Islamists are mentally ill, since their violence is based upon a paranoid fantasy of escape from the horror of the meaningless present into a meaningful future premised on the destruction of all others, but a mistake to imagine that theirs' is somehow simply an individual pathology that is *not* founded upon a wider cultural condition of complexity, chaos and the collapse of symbolic integrity (Benslama, 2009).

In order to illustrate this point, and further contextualise Guattari's (1995) theory of complexity and chaos, I also seek to theorise the despair of the present through a discussion of Bernard Stiegler's (2011b, 2012, 2014b) work on disbelief, discredit, default and the failure of the spirit of capitalism. What matters here is that Stiegler locates the disenchantment of capitalism, and the related rise of disbelief and despair that has led to general social collapse, in the emergence of the final phase of late capitalism or what the Italian autonomist followers of Guattari write about through the idea of semio-capitalism (Berardi, 2015; Genosko, 2012; Marazzi, 2008, 2011). According to Guattari (2009: 244), and his Italian followers including Berardi and Marazzi, semio-capitalism refers to the moment when capitalist value escapes materiality and becomes lodged in the pure abstraction of sign. At this point all language becomes subject to the logic of commodification and valuation and there is no meaning beyond the 'more or less' calculations of relative price. In this context, Stiegler (2011b, 2012) shows that the problem with late capitalism, and in this respect *lateness* refers to the senility of the economic domination of the world, starts when the symbolic order is reduced to the carrier of quantitative value and no longer enables humans to properly articulate their experiences of the world. When this happens language has no real, qualitative value but simply measures productivity and profitability. This is why the symbolic order fails, and centrally fails as a network able to support civilized subjectivity, with the result that the subject falls into psychosis (recall that in Lacan's work psychosis names what happens when the subject fragments before the *failed* master signifier and the symbolic order it structures) and a pathological, defensive mode of

subjectivity defined by aggression towards the external world, which becomes necessarily threatening and destructive. In Stiegler's (2012: 80–103) work the product of this process is the miserable dis-individual, a kind of destroyed self that survives through violent acting out (or what he calls *negative sublimation*), which becomes the principal means for the assertion of their existence in a world that seems chaotic and meaningless. In order to illustrate this argument, Stiegler (2012: 47) refers to the phenomena of the school shooting, for example Columbine or Sandy Hook, where young men seek to take their revenge on the cold world through the destruction of its future in young people and children. However, we might also refer to the recent terror attacks across Europe, which similarly represent violent expressions of an attempt to make meaning in the world, and other explosions of apparently *meaningless* violence.

Building upon Stiegler's work, I move on to take up this idea of negative sublimation (2012: 6) and read it against Franco Berardi's theory of the digital apocalypse from his recent book *Heroes* (2015b), but also *And* (2015a), *After the Future* (2011), and *Uprising* (2012). In *Heroes,* Berardi supports Stiegler by showing how the collapse of the western cultural symbolic order under the pressure of global capitalism has led to the destruction of individualism and centrally the impossibility of individual action. Here, the collapse of the individual able to make a difference, and the collapse of the hero who acts upon the world, has led to the rise of a culture of violent anti-heroism, symbolised by the violence of figures such as Anders Behring Breivik, who seek to create meaning through notoriety and infamy. In much the same way that Stiegler (2012) attributes the rise of this kind of rage and violence to the collapse of symbolic systems able to ground meaningful subjectivity, in perhaps his most expansive work, *And* (2015a), Berardi shows how new media globalisation has effectively eroded human forms of communication and destroyed the possibility of the articulation of significance in semio-capitalist representations of value. Under these conditions, Berardi (2015a) explains that there is no hope and no future, since the subject is cast adrift in a sea of meaningless symbols of quantitative value that makes it impossible to imagine the new on the basis of a vision of the present and an understanding of the past. In this respect, Berardi's individual is truly lost in the existential sense of the word because they cannot locate themselves in the world on the basis that they have no real language to articulate their experiences of the present.

When all that matters is productivity and profitability, experience becomes meaningless. As a result, the future ceases to exist beyond the endless demand to produce more and increase profitability, which is no kind of future at all because it fails to imagine the new. What, then, is the alternative to the dystopia of global capitalism without a future? In the conclusion of my article I pick up Berardi's (2012: 134–171) claim that escape from the horror of the late capitalist nightmare of connectivity, complexity and chaos would have to entail the reclamation of language from the abstraction of finance and new media communication and the reengagement of a poetic approach to expression where language becomes the carrier of embodied experience and perception in the world and perhaps more importantly of being on the earth. In this respect, I think Berardi (2012) can be read with Stiegler (2013: 98), who argues that escape from the destroyed culture of the present resides in a new politics of knowledge, discipline and cultural engagement. However, where I think Berardi (2012: 8) represents an advance on Stiegler is in his reference to the experience of the body. Although he does not fully work out exactly what his embodied critique of semio-capitalist abstraction would mean for the contemporary, my view is that his target is what we might call the semiotic reduction of reality that tears language out of communication with corporeal experience. In the semio-capitalist world of Berardi (2012), and for that matter Stiegler (2014a), the problem is that language has become subject to the logic of floatation and has no relation to real experience. This is, therefore, why Berardi's (2012: 20) notion of the uprising is not simply about a taste for poetry, but rather concerns the creation of new worlds founded in the articulation of experience and perception, and Stiegler's (2013) critique would benefit from the language of embodiment to gloss his theory of cultural politics. In this instance, it is not simply that the escape from the horrors of the permanent ruined present of late capitalism relies on a kind of elite cultural politics, where there is more to life than work and money, but rather that these cultural politics must reimagine the world through the expression of lived experience on the earth. In this way, the world, or the construction of a symbolic order able to sustain subjectivity, emerges from and presupposes expressions of an embodied experience and perception of earth.

Finally, I conclude my article by returning to Guattari's (1995: 135) theory of the chaosmic spasm, which I seek to contextualise in terms of the theory of geo-philosophy, that he wrote about in his final work with Deleuze, *What*

is Philosophy? (1994). The point here is to show that what Guattari imagines through the figure of the chaosmic spasm is a new ecological, terrestrial mode of subjectivity rooted in the experience and perception of earth. Since ecology is characterised by complexity, this new form of subjectivity could never form around a static paranoid fantasy of self-identity, but would instead escape the desperate need to assert defensive security through its ability to express experiences and perceptions of an earth-bound existence in a new world that is sensitive to what it feels like to live, suffer and imagine other ways of life. In this way I show how this new reality, the reality of the subject endlessly made and remade in the experience, perception and expression of life on earth and in the world, is what Guattari (1995) imagines when he writes of chaosmosis. It is this form of identification, which would render complexity liveable, that Guattari (2009) thinks will emerge from the catastrophe of integrated world capitalism, and which both Stiegler (2009) and Berardi (2015a) explore in their own works that are concerned with what we might call the contemporary new media apocalypse. However, before I reach the point where I conclude in a discussion of the ecosophical mode of subjectivity, I want to take up a discussion of the concept of the spasm and the ways it is understood by first, the Canadian media theorist Arthur Kroker (1993) and second, Guattari (1995), who complicates the idea through reference to the concept of the chaosmic spasm.

2. The Chaosmic Semio-Capitalist Spasm

In his *Spasm* (1993) the Canadian media theorist Arthur Krorker explores the other side of the virtual, new media utopia that emerged in the 1990s. Written in the teeth of this utopia, where the limitations of reality itself seemed to have collapsed before the virtual where everything seemed possible, Kroker suggests that the problem of the new computational universe is that the possibilities that it might allow are firmly held in check by a technological concern for functionality. Even though it may not have been immediately apparent, the new utopia was never, in Kroker's view, open to human possibility. Instead, it was primarily concerned with the absolute expansion of a logical system organised around digital data, and the representation and reconfiguration of the world in instrumental terms. In this way, Kroker reverses Deleuze and Guattari's (1987) idea of the body without organs, which was primarily about the schizophrenic overcoming of the bounded organism in the terrestrial body

ecological, through the idea of the organs without a body (1993: 36–46), where all that matters is functionality and the kind of rationality that ends in the nihilistic disenchantment of wider significance. The difference between these two figures is, therefore, that while Deleuze and Guattari's (1987) formulation seeks to found subjectivity in significance based upon the ecology of life, Kroker's (2003) virtual utopia attempts to escape the limits of terrestrial reality for computational metaphysics and the flesh of earth-bound identity for the new infinite space of the digital where life can be made and remade without concern for boundaries. However, the problem with this new utopianism, which we might call the final modern utopia based upon the strategy of escape, is that its reliance on what Kroker (1993: 5–6) writes of in terms of a logic of floatation was actually tightly bound in terms of its fanatical adherence to the instrumental rationality of digital universe. Here, everything can be reduced to the representation of zeroes and ones. Although the virtual utopians often imagined the infinite possibilities for novel experience that might be opened up by the new computational reality of the internet, Kroker (1993: 7) writes of the great 'recline of western civilization' in order to illustrate the death of real experience in easy, coded representations of reality. The truth of the new virtual utopia of the 1990s was, thus, in Kroker's view a kind of laid back, exhausted stroll towards the end of humanity. Slouching towards the apocalypse, Kroker's (1993) vision of the experience of spasm emerges in the abyss between digital ecstasy, where everything seems possible on condition of its functionality, and earth-bound decay, brought about by the abandonment of experience and perception in a utopian fantasy of the absolute reach of numbers and digital data.

In Kroker's (1993: 39) theory of the new world algorithm, where numbers and data are the ontological truth of the reality of experience and perception, he shows how purity becomes the central political category and mutations of newness and unpredictability are destroyed in the name of functionality. The irony of the virtual utopia was, in this respect, that it produced a kind of nightmarish computational dystopia, what Kroker (1993: 160) calls a zero-culture, characterised by a form of cyber-puritanism allergic to the thickness of the flesh, experience, perception, and more broadly terrestrial life itself. It is this situation, where the virtual sphere of computation expands to the detriment of embodied existence, which returns in the form of a kind of excremental remainder, that Kroker captures in the concept of spasm. It is the same experience of spasm

that I think Guattari writes of in the final pages of his book *Chaosmosis* (1995: 135), where he opposes the hyper-rationalism of what he calls integrated world capitalism to the reality of earth-bound existence and shows how the distance between these two worlds finds its limit in the chaosmic spasm or momentary phase transition, which sees one universe of (in)significance collapse before some other vision of the world.

The problem of integrated world capitalism or semio-capitalism is, in the work of the key thinker of the autonomists Christian Marazzi (2008, 2011), that economic value is no longer related to things. Reading Marazzi's (2008: 13–69) work we can see that upon the deregulation or floatation of money by Richard Nixon in the 1970s, there was no longer a solid relationship between money and materiality (precious metals), which meant that money was able to take flight from the world. But if the issue was the simple separation of value and things, the problem might be one more concerned with the integrity of money, rather than some wider crisis of meaningfulness itself, which might have opened up utopian possibilities for the rearticulation of value. However, what floatation, and the emergence of semio-capitalism, actually produced was the colonisation of reality by the symbolic form of money that was able to transform its idealistic redundancy into a virtue on the basis of its absolute commensurability. Herein resides the real catastrophe of semio-capitalism, integrated world capitalism, and symbolic value for Guattari and later his autonomist followers. It is not simply that money floats off into the metaphysical universe of Platonic forms, but rather that it comes back in its redundancy to over-code human and non-human reality and transform everything into an empty semblance of economic value. The ultimate Platonic sleight of hand is, therefore, the semio-capitalist reduction of terrestrial life to abstract value that becomes (virtual) reality itself, which is then absolutely malleable precisely because it is no longer real in the thick phenomenological sense of the term we might find in the work of Merleau-Ponty (2012).

It is this situation that Guattari (1995, 2014) thinks has become unsustainable and unliveable for humans because they are essentially bound to the flesh of the earth through their own bodies, which they cannot escape. Apart from the violation of the thickness of things in the name of the infinity of abstraction, the catastrophe of semio-capitalism is that it destroys the fleshy integrity of the symbolic order, which holds the subject in place through the provision

of a meaningful world, through its totalitarian reduction of communication to rational calculation concerned with productivity and profitability. Thus the two-fold problem of the dystopic system that Guattari (2009) writes about in terms of integrated world capitalism is that it transforms the human life world into a paper thin construct organised around empty capitalist objectives focused on profitability *and at the same time* blocks the emergence of alternatives to this meaningless universe through the transformation of economy into a system defined by scarcity and the struggle for survival. Cast out of the systems of significance that might enable social action, the individual collapses towards the figure that Stiegler (2012: 80–103) talks about through the idea of the dis-individual, and humanity starts to resemble the form of animality that Heidegger (2001) found poor in the world. In fact, the situation may be even worse than this, since there is a distinct difference between the animal and the dis-individual, which is that the animal occupies an ecological *umwelt* that organises its behaviour, whereas the dis-individual is thrown out of the meaningful world into a kind of barren un-world that seems ecologically unsustainable and unliveable. This is how, I think, integrated world capitalism penetrates through to the level of subjectivity and essentially turns humans into zombies, staggering through their environment in a liminal state somewhere between life and death.

The zombification of the modern or post-modern subject has been brought about by the reduction of the symbolic order to the level of a kind of instrumental command system that leads to the emergence of a hyper-rational subject that cannot easily survive and is now on the verge of total collapse. In this respect, the problem that the desperate dis-individual, or we might say *post-mortem subject*, faces, is that the contemporary situation is worse than that which Nietzsche (1961) imagined in the 19th century when he wrote of the horror of Godless modernity, simply because the abyss of capitalism blocks the possibility of the *Übermensch* through its transformation of reality into code. Here, the situation of integrated world capitalism more closely resembles the horror-show imagined by Weber (2001: 123) in the final pages of his work on the spirit of capitalism, where the iron cage transforms society into a system of bureaucratic rules and regulation devoid of wider significance, because the existential abyss is always-already full of nonsense and there appears little room for the new. However, I think that it is this condition that Guattari (1995: 135) considers

representative of a kind of transitional moment, where apocalyptic collapse opens out onto the possibility of something else. This is what, in my view, he captures in the idea of the chaosmic spasm, precisely because the present seems entirely unliveable and unsustainable. Under these post-human conditions, the chaos of global complexity – which seems meaningless because of high levels of post-human technological development, the lightning fast speeds of economic interaction, and levels of inter-connectedness that mean that events seem to appear ex nihilo – suggests the possibility of utopian innovation in the creation of what Guattari (1995: 10–11) calls a novel ethico-aesthetic paradigm. But how would this new paradigm work?

Although Guattari is light on the precise detail of the possible emergence of this new order, my view would be that it would occur through a necessary phase transition from integrated world capitalism to a new ecological vision of the reality of the world. Thrown out of the human world of significance into the post-human quantitative un-world of balance sheets, the monstrous, de-subjectified, dis-individual would need to return to the earth and to their experience and perception of suffering in order to imagine a new world beyond the present. Given the poverty of language available to the autistic un-self, they would need to fall back on the most basic terms concerned with the expression of pain and suffering in order to articulate their ethical opposition to the semio-capitalist un-world and from there seek to represent the truth of schizophrenic subjectivity where the self only ever survives through its relation to others and its terrestrial life support machine. This is, in my view, the kind of world that Guattari (1995: 108) imagines and what he means when he writes of machinism in his ecosophical works. In this context, machinism does not refer to the Heideggerian nightmare of modernity from his *The Question concerning Technology* (1977), where everything collapses before the instrumental rationality of the machine organised around the world picture that enframes existence itself, but rather the more ancient conception of technology captured in the term *techne*, which suggests the sympathetic communication and coevolution of humanity and environment that we also find in the work of Gilbert Simondon (2016). Against this more ancient conception of technological machinism, which suggests ecological communication and interaction, it is, I think, possible to argue that the virtual utopia that Kroker writes of in his *Spasm* (1993) represents the final stage in the development of Heidegger's modern technological system

precisely because of the ways in which it uses, abuses and brutalises man and nature in the creation of a totally integrated system organised around infinite commensurability and endless exchange in the name of profitability.

While this model of technology is *programmatic* and *static* in terms of its conception of change, what Guattari (1995: 108) imagines through the term 'machinism' is *open*, *dynamic* and defined by *deterritorialisation*. However, the converse is also the case. Where the modern, and what would later become the post-modern, version of technology *seeks to escape all limits* in the name of abstraction and virtuality, Guattari's ecosophical notion of machinism communicates with other machines in the name of the creation of *bounded sense and significance* in the otherwise chaotic un-world. In this respect, I think Guattari's understanding of technology respects the limits of terrestrial space, which is precisely what we find expressed in his theory of geophilosophy outlined in his final book with Deleuze, *What is Philosophy?* (1994), even though this humility before ground is endlessly extended by the shifting nature of reality (the chaotic un-ground) to produce a dynamic, fundamental thought in touch with the abyss of experience, perception and earth. This is what Guattari (1995: 80–87; 112) means by chaosmosis – which refers to the way that chaos can find a *temporary form* in a kind of fundamental thought that is simultaneously able to make sense and respect the endless turbulence of reality – that he attempts to explain through a rearticulation of Freud's (2003) theory of the death drive from his key paper *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. Where Freud takes his young relative's game of fort / da for a symbol of the basic inertia of being that is endlessly repetitive of cycles of birth, life, and death, Guattari (1995: 72–76) points out that the first stage of the game (fort) may be taken to represent the traumatic experience of chaos that the little boy orders through the second stage of his play (da) in the name of the creation of sense in the world. While Freud emphasises the essential trauma of being, which humans can never escape until they flatline out of existence, Guattari's more optimistic reading of the work of life concerns the way that humans are able to make meaning in the world in order to organise their experiences.

It is possible to argue that Guattari (1995: 135) saw the potential collapse of integrated world capitalism in the happy days of the late 1980s and early 1990s, when the really existing communism fell before a capitalist future that seemed to promise endless freedom and prosperity to those who had been locked out

of the American-led boom since the 1950s. When Frances Fukuyama (1992) wrote of the end of history in the triumph of capitalism and George Bush I spoke of the NWO (New World Order) of American power, Guattari's early 1990s critique of complexity seemed off the mark, simply because there was a clear organising structure through which to understand the new globalised world, which was defined by concepts such as freedom, democracy and prosperity. In many respects the virtual utopia of the 1990s, which saw the internet become perhaps the most visible representation of processes of globalisation, seemed to make these abstract principles *virtually concrete*, since it appeared to enable endless freedom to communicate, consume and develop. The emergence of Web 2.0 and social media further supported the fantasy of the virtual utopia through the promise of a new kind of cyber-democracy and cyber-society and in many respects it seemed that Marshall McLuhan's (2001) media utopia of the 1950s had been realised at the end of the 20th century. However, in much the same way that McLuhan's (2001: 45–53) utopian story of global media was qualified by his dark vision of the gadget lover, who makes up for their loss of embodiment through the possession of the high tech fetish object, it soon became clear that the virtual utopia was also a new disciplinary or, to refer to Deleuze's (1997: 177–183) famous essay, control space for the integration of workers, who would now never stop working, and consumers, who were similarly never out of reach for corporations desperate to increase their profit margins.

In this way, the virtual space of absolute freedom, the abyss of possibility founded upon the bright light of the screen, opened out onto a nightmarish dystopia, a slack jawed world defined by trans-fixed cybernauts caught somewhere or nowhere between here, there and everywhere. Caught up in the virtual un-world, where one could apparently float free of the ground of terrestrial existence, even the promise of 'the social network' where one could make millions of new friends, seemed to fail before the logic of commodification and quantification, which saw friends become immaterial objects that one collects in the name of the quantifiable popularity necessary to offset the void of real life beyond the shiny, happy world of screen culture. In this respect it is possible to read what we might call the spasm of new media culture, which saw the virtual utopia contract from its expansive utopian phase of absolute possibility back towards a more dystopian realisation of the limitations of the immaterial

computational world, in terms representative of the evolution of the wider culture of floatation from the 1990s through to the present period where there seems to be no way to move forward, but through a return to the real world of terrestrial bodies. The signs of this impasse have become clear since the turn of the 21st century. According to Slavoj Žižek's (2009) exploration of the failure of the final utopia of the 20th century in his book *First As Tragedy, Then As Farce*, the first shock to the New World Order was 9/11, which struck at the very heart of American economic power, and opened out onto the 'war on terror'. Akin to Vietnam, which similarly proved that technological power can never overcome territorial resistance, the 'war on terror' was soon revealed to be unwinnable, economically unsustainable, and perhaps even worse, enormously destructive for the project of global integration, which began to freeze before the translation of communication into its fearful other, contagion. On the back of the shock of 9/11, the second shock to the virtual utopia took the form of the global financial crash of 2008, which further undermined the semio-capitalist project by showing that the creation of money from money ex nihilo was ultimately an unsustainable project: the repressed real would continue to return from the abyss of materiality hidden from view by the shiny world of virtuality.

The deep economic problem that the crash revealed was essentially concerned with Nixon's floatation of money in the early 1970s; the subsequent deregulation of finance and the rise of fractional reserve banking; and the overleveraging of available assets in the form of debts that turned out to be unsustainable because of a lack of real economic activity. Of course, this process of financialisation, which took place from the 1970s through the 1980s and 1990s up to the crash in 2008 under the banner of neoliberal economics, was the motor of globalisation and what Guattari (2009) wrote about in terms of integrated world capitalism. When capitalism started to fail in the 1970s, because of a crisis of productivity and a related lack of growth, floatation and financial innovation seemed to represent the way forward, because they allowed for the expansion of capitalism beyond the limits made possible by real production alone. While this process organised around the virtual creation of money from money for investment in innovation and financial profit was supposed to be made safe by systems of securitisation, these structures could not prevent the near collapse of the system in 2008 because of the abyss that had opened up between levels of debt based in virtual money and the really existing value founded in the econ-

omy of bodies and things. At this point, the virtual utopia of free floating signs came crashing back down to earth in the revelation of its economic limits in reality. However, while the supporters of neoliberal financialisation have sought to save the system, from the point of view that the problem of 2008 was an issue of greedy bankers looking to make a killing from people who would never be able to make their repayments, what Guattari's work and particularly his *Three Ecologies* (2014: 27–28) suggests is that the financial crash was less representative of a narrow issue of economic mismanagement and more concerned with global ecological sustainability relating to first, the ability of humans to live in a complex world where qualitative significance has been undermined by quantitative calculation; second, the possibility of society and social integration in a world where people have lost touch with embodied language and the primary good has become competition; and finally, the potential of the world to survive the progressive destruction of the earth that sustains organic life by capitalism, which, even in its virtual form where it seeks the elimination of materiality, lives off the exploitation of planetary resources.

From the point of view of Guattari's (1995, 2014) ecosophical works, the problem of integrated world capitalism and the virtual utopia is, therefore, far more expansive than an issue of financial mismanagement and instead relates back to the post-modern rejection of materiality in the name of the apparent freedom of abstraction that has now run into its outer limits in the formation of a bleak un-world that suffers the loss of its terrestrial body. In this sense, it is possible to argue that the problem with the present is actually less about the psychotic flight from reality into fantasy (the post-modern critique of the hyper-real we find in Baudrillard (2010), for example) and more about a schizoid break from the fantasy of virtual semio-capitalism that has occupied people since the 1970s but has now run its course in the contemporary period, which we might talk about in terms of *post-mortemism* defined by the chaosmic spasm, the terror of endings, and existential questions about what comes next. For Guattari and his autonomist followers, such as the contemporary German thinker Gerald Raunig (2016), the answer to this question is, I think, that we must seek to translate the lack of a post-modern virtual future, which finds representation in the post-mortemism of the destroyed individual, into a potential excess, which opens the otherwise closed, militarised self out onto others and the earth itself in the form of the figure that Raunig calls the dividual. Where

Stiegler's (2012) dis-individual represents the person who has lost their sense of self founded in the ruined symbolic order and cannot think beyond the meaningless present into the future for this reason, I think that the potential of the dividual resides in the possibility of the conversion of ruined subjectivity that knows nothing but pain and suffering into an ecological being founded upon their ability to communicate their experience and perception to others on the basis of their common occupation of earth-bound bodies. This is, in my view, how the ecosophical response to spasm, which represents the painful, strained relation between the virtual and the material might begin to find resolution in the foundation of a new sustainable world based upon being on the earth. In the final section of this article I propose to outline the longer history of the spasm through reference to Stiegler (1998, 2009) and Berardi (2012, 2015) before returning to Guattari (1995) to argue that the other side of the chaosmic spasm must involve a return to the kind of ecological being he wrote about with Deleuze in his theory of geo-philosophy (1994).

3. The Politics of Spasm

Although he never mentions the idea of spasm, it is possible to argue that Bernard Stiegler (1998, 2009, 2011a) provides a pre-history of the concept in his three volume work, *Technics and Time,* through his discussion of what he calls disorientation. In the first volume of this study, *The Fault of Epimetheus* (1998), Stiegler picks up Plato's (2009) *Protagoras*, and specifically the myth of Epimetheus (16-18), to oppose the Promethean reading of technology where the machine represents a symbol of human superiority over the world. In order to oppose this story, Stiegler refers to Prometheus' brother, the comic figure of Epimetheus, who forgets to make sure that humans are ready for entry into the world. The fault of Epimetheus is that he provides every other animal with the means of survival (claws, wings, sharp teeth, thick fur and so on), but forgets about men, which means that Prometheus has to steal fire from the Gods in order to give humanity a fighting chance in the state of nature. We know the rest of the story, which concerns the punishment of Prometheus and the emergence of techno-man, but the importance of the reference to Epimetheus for Stiegler is less clear. It turns out that the importance of Epimetheus is that he illustrates humanity's *prematurity*. We are always born too soon, inadequate, *in a state of default*, and have to spend the rest of our lives (history) trying to make up for

this lack through technological development. At this point we enter familiar Heideggerian (2001) territory, where we learn that the difference between animals and humans is that animals live in ecological harmony with nature while humans have an uncanny world-forming relation to their environment, even though Stiegler's (1998) point is always to emphasise human lack. The rest of Stiegler's history, which develops through volume II of *Technics and Time* (2009), revolves around what happens when technological evolution starts to outpace humanity. When this happens the very mechanical organs meant to support human life turn upon their creators and become monstrous things that throw their former masters back into a state of inadequacy. In order to capture this problem, which refers back to Heidegger's (1977) critique of modern technology, but also Marx's (1998) work on estrangement and proletarianisation, Stiegler (2009) explains that humans enter into a state of disorientation, since they live in a high tech world beyond their comprehension. In other works, including his book on youth and the generations (2010), Stiegler points out that the neoliberal economy and the exploitation of communication in the name of profitability exacerbate the problem of disorientation because the use of media to capture consumers means that language is no longer available for mapping the world and making sense. It is through this idea, which Stiegler (2014a) talks about in terms of symbolic misery, that I think it is possible to connect his work to the theories of the contemporary critics of semio-capitalism, such as Marazzi (2008, 2011), who show how the potential of language to transmit human significance breaks down before its neoliberal transformation into a means to promote capitalism. When language no longer works to enable the translation of real experience and perception into words suitable for communication with others in the name of the creation of the world, humans effectively fall out of the symbolic order and collapse back into a kind of psychotic state of nature. Thus we encounter the experience that Guattari (1995: 135) writes of through the idea of the chaosmic spasm.

Cast out of symbolic structures into near chaos, men become bankrupt, in default, caught in a state of existential lack, and thrown back upon their animality. This is the case even though we have seen that this connection of the dis-individual and animality might be overly optimistic, since the animal lives in harmony with the world, while the dis-individual occupies an uncanny, monstrous un-world. However, it is precisely here, in the teeth of chaos, that

the possibility of the new emerges, because the destruction of the techno-human and the birth of a new kind of post-mortem savage opens up the space for a reconnection to experience and the expression of the perception of what it is to occupy the position of earth-bound life. But Stiegler (2012: 4) is clear that this will not be a painless process, since the contemporary moment has become about the desperate attempt to hold on to the ruins of modern and post-modern symbolic systems through addictogenic forms of identification characterised by the primacy of drive over desire. For Stiegler (2010, 2012), this situation comes about because late capitalism exploits the destruction of desire, which necessarily relies on the integrity of human symbolic systems to create meaningful objects, in the emergence of drive-based economics where the addictogenic nature of drive makes it possible to sell everything and anything on the basis that 'this thing' will fill the dark abyss at the centre of 'your' life. Following Adorno and Horkheimer (1997), however, Stiegler is clear that drive is a *fatal* (or indeed thanatological) machine, since its objective is the reduction of the misery, pain and horror of the traumatic life lived in the un-world where there is no safety, security, or sense of home in others or in the wider environment, but what it actually achieves is the augmentation of alienation, estrangement and objectification. Against drive, which simply piles misery upon misery, Stiegler (2013: 132–133) states that educators must seek to engage in a battle for the integrity of knowledge, thought and significance, but what he fails to explain is that these new cultural politics must prioritise the relationship between language and other forms of expression and human experience, perception, and being on the earth, because it is precisely this which has been lost in the horror story of neoliberalism.

Following this train of thought, perhaps it is possible to put Stiegler's (2013: 1–4) reference to Winnicott's (2005) theory of play, where the toy becomes a symbol of security and safety and a container for meaningful interaction, in conversation with Guattari's (1995) own extensive discussion of the object, which turns the oedipal triangle of Daddy, Mummy, and Me into an ecological dialogue between Self, Other, and the ultimate object, Earth in order to properly ground his account in a theory of earth-bound life. Moreover, my sense is that this eco-phenomenological critique of the contemporary is also the hidden basis of Berardi's (2012, 2015) recent works, including *And*, which is subtitled *The Phenomenology of the End*. In terms of explaining the problem of the end,

Berardi follows Stiegler in respect of his view that the end concerns the inability of humans to effectively articulate a vision of the future that is qualitatively different from the present. However, where Berardi (2015a: 9–111) departs from Stiegler is in the way he locates this problem in the politics of the global network, which he explains through the opposition between *conjunction*, where self and other meet in such a way that changes both sides of the interaction, and *connection*, which he thinks dominates today, and comprises a programmatic model of debased sociality where there is no deep engagement or transformative effect upon either person. For Berardi, *conjunction* represents true human relationality, where individuals engage with each other empathetically on the basis of their common occupation of a world and, beyond this, the earth itself. By contrast, he writes of *connection* in terms of the *simulation* of interaction, where engagement takes place through the medium of a technological network that sets rules and regulations about how relationality should take place. In other words, the interaction is already mapped out and planned, and its future outcome is always already known. Berardi (2015a: 233–331) points out that this leads to, on the one hand, the autistic disassociation of self from others and nature, and, on the other hand, the emergence of a kind of totalitarian or globalitarian network where everybody seems to be friends with everybody else, on the basis that the programmatic logic of commensurability ensures that nobody would have a reason to *not* be friends with anybody else.

But the key point here is that this global negative friendship network (think Facebook or Twitter) is a simulation that masks the reality of the monstrous machine that alienates people from their ecological being in order to transform them into tech-no-subjects who follow its programmatic logic on the basis of their melancholic despair about their lost object of love – the other, the world, the earth itself. This is, essentially, Berardi's (2015a) critique of new media, which is that the network has become a machine for the provision of the simulation of intimacy in a cold world where true intimacy has been banned by a global, technological system that is allergic to the thickness of materiality that necessarily refuses its own reduction to objective truth or quantifiable value. Living in the cold technological un-world, it is no surprise that people cling to their gadgets, which connect them to the global network that can provide a virtual sense of home, and seek to lose themselves in connectivity and fantastical cyber-space. The contemporary new media network has become a technological

surrogate, which was, for Avital Ronell (1989: 280), exactly what Alexander Graham Bell unconsciously understood when he called America's first telephone network, *Ma Bell*, in 1876. Thus, the new media network stands in for mother, and provides the simulation of safety and security that human subjects would have otherwise found in their real mothers, before the screen found its way into every space in the home. However, the problem with this 'new media Mom' is that she is jealous and possessive. She seeks to capture and control her children in ways that even Freud's (2003) original nightmarish engulfing mother who comes to symbolise death never would. This is the case because she knows she needs to keep them away from their real Moms, and beyond them, their common global mother, mother earth. This is why techno-Mom traps her children within cyber-space and what Berardi (2015a: 41–48) calls cyber-time, which requires the tech-no-subject to spend their life online in order to keep up with the blizzard of communication flowing across the network and through their inbox. For Berardi (2015a), this is the final form of futurism, the futurism of the end times, because there is now no more space and no more time for expansion to happen. Where space is concerned, processes of globalisation meant that the earth became lost somewhere deep underneath the un-world of late capitalism, where all that matters is work and shopping, but this soon opened up onto the final frontier of time and the colonisation of every moment by economic logic. Here, the difference between work and free time fell into what we might call capital time, where every living moment becomes about value creation, and beyond this the automisation of humanity, which comprises the destruction of freedom in the necessity to work and consume. For Berardi (2015a: 41–57), it is this situation that has led to the rebellion of the embodied mind in the endless list of mental health conditions that plague the contemporary individual – anxiety, depression, dysmorphia, addiction, and so on – which are, in short, psychological representations of spasm.

Finally, the condition of spasm, which is the focus of this article, has its own kind of politics, which are concerned with the desperate attempt to escape from the pain of estrangement. While many have sought to escape into pharmaceuticals in order to speed up, slow down, get hard, or whatever other response is necessary in order to survive the un-world, others have fallen into alternative kinds of addictive behaviour. Regarding sex addiction, for example, Berardi (2015a: 50) notes that the lonely cybernaut replaces real intimacy with the

simulation of sexual interaction in the consumption of hard-core Californian porn straight out of the San Fernando Valley, where pumped up sexual superheroes fuck like machines in the name of a barren kind of pleasure that knows no other. Ironically, Berardi (2015a: 68–91) thinks that it is possible to trace the hyper-sexualisation of contemporary culture, which objectifies the other in porno scenes that strip back its phenomenological depths until there is nothing left but a stupid lump of flesh, to the original American puritans because they were the first settlers who turned against the organic world, the body and the flesh because of its imperfections and relationship to sin. In a sense, this explains the strange ambivalence of the online porn scene, which resides in its simultaneous fascination and revulsion with the flesh, and the reason why the sexualisation of tech-no-society seems to know no bounds. While techno-capitalism pushes ever further into abstraction, the destroyed subject seeks out estranged representations of their former fleshy self only to lose this immediately in cold mechanical fucking on screen that transforms the pornstar into a mindless thing, closer to Heidegger's (2001) rock, which seems absolutely un-related, than the animal poor in the world. The result of this immediate cancellation of the pleasure that comes from intimacy in the horror of objectification on screen is that the lost subject experiences the compulsion to push on ever further into pornographic culture, concerned with the disappearance of phenomenological depth in the transformation of bodies into data.

But what is the objective here? Surely the objective of the online porn addict is the identification of what it feels like to have a body, to experience intimacy with the other, and relate to them on the basis of a common experience of the earth, *without* the engagement of bodies that are impure in the techno-scientific semio-capitalist universe of abstract signs and symbols. Since this is a fatal strategy, and there is no way to experience intimacy without some level of carnal interaction, the estranged figures, which Berardi (2015a: 96–110) calls neo-humans fall into addiction and, in the infamous case of the Japanese Hikikomori, or 'shut in', retreat back into media technology in a desperate attempt to reach out to the world of others. But if this represents one side of the politics of spasm, which Berardi (2015a: 311–321) thinks will eventually result in the emergence of a new form of neo-human readjustment, what he calls *neuro-totalitarianism*, where the embodied self is totally aligned with the global circuitry of semio-capitalism through the mapping and manipulation of neural

networks, the other side of the strained, stressed relation between technology and humanity resides in Stiegler's (2013) cultural politics, Berardi's (2012) poetic uprising, and ultimately Guattari's (1995) chaosmic creation of ecological sense – the ethico-aesthetic paradigm. Where Stiegler pushes for a form of culture that might make life meaningful, and Berardi suggests the reclamation of language from semio-capitalism in the name of a return to a poetic form of language that is able to express human experience and perception in the world, Guattari's ecosophy shows how the escape from the contemporary impasse will not come through ever more virtuality, but instead requires a new eco-politics that recognises the organic limits of the individual, the position of the individual within a society made up of others, and the dependence of this social world of significance upon the earth, which ultimately supports life and cannot be simply expended in the name of profitability. Thus, I think that it is possible to read Guattari, Stiegler and Berardi together and ultimately understand their critiques of spasm culture through reference to Guattari's final work with Deleuze, *What is Philosophy?* (1994), where geo-philosophy becomes a vehicle for thinking through a new ecological utopianism: a minor utopianism characterised by humility rather than hubris, and a deep understanding of the ontological truth of what we might call being on earth. The minor utopia is, therefore, the hopeless hope found on the other side of the chaosmic spasm, which signals the collapse of civilization into neoliberal barbarism, and the radical potential that Guattari, Stiegler and Berardi similarly search for in the new media apocalypse.

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